

The background of the cover features a man with light-colored hair and a woman with long brown hair. They are both sitting cross-legged on a bed of dried, golden-brown leaves. The man is wearing a dark, button-down shirt and dark pants. The woman is wearing a traditional red and white patterned kimono. The scene is set outdoors, with sunlight filtering through trees, creating a warm, autumnal atmosphere.

Written By

You Shizaki
椎崎夕

Illustrated By
Kumiko Sasaki
佐々木久美子

Gentle Cage

優しい檻

June

Yaoi



Novel

"Itsuki," Tokiwa called out, his voice filled with surprising sweetness. "You are mine."

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," so goes the old adage about art. And nowhere is this truer than in the relationship between Itsuki and Tokiwa. To everyone else, Itsuki is nothing more than a useless wallflower, but only Tokiwa can see that the man is actually a diamond-in-the-rough.

It all began eight years ago, when amateur painter Itsuki Hashimoto and up-and-coming sculptor Masatsugu Tokiwa became friends through their love for art. But a few years later, family circumstances forced Itsuki to cut Tokiwa out of his life. Now, Itsuki is living a confined life as the "human pet" of Yamabe-sensei, Tokiwa's former teacher.

Can Tokiwa help Itsuki break free of his cage? Or has Itsuki become too much of a living "doll," without a soul or freewill of his own?



junemanga.com



www.bs-garden.com

NOVEL / DRAMA / ROMANCE

US \$8.95

ISBN-13 978-1-56970-712-8



9 781569 707128

50895





Tokiwa was close and there was nowhere to hide.
No matter where Itsuki went, Tokiwa would find him again.

Gentle Cage

優しい檻

Written by
YOU SHIIZAKI

Illustrations by
KUMIKO SASAKI

Written By
You Shiizaki

You Shiizaki is an Aquarius. She is currently in the process of remodeling her workroom. She hopes that it doesn't collapse before it's finished!

Illustrated By
Kumiko Sasaki

Kumiko Sasaki is a Taurus. Her blood type is B. She is a total health nut. Health is wealth!



Los Angeles



Tokyo



Gentle Cage

GENTLE CAGE – YASASHII ORI © YOU SHIIZAKI / KUMIKO SASAKI. All rights reserved. Original Japanese edition published in 2007 by Taiyoh Tosho Publishing Co., Ltd. English translation copyright © 2008 by DIGITAL MANGA, Inc./ TAIYOH TOSHO CO., LTD. All other material © 2008 by DIGITAL MANGA, Inc. All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the copyright holders. Any likeness of characters, places, and situations featured in this publication to actual persons (living or deceased), events, places, and situations are purely coincidental. All characters depicted in sexually explicit scenes in this publication are at least the age of consent or older. The JUNÉ logo is ™ of DIGITAL MANGA, Inc.

Written by You Shiizaki

Illustrated by Kumiko Sasaki

English translation by Bianca Jarvis

Co-Publishers:

Eiji Koide – Taiyoh Tosho Publishing Co., Inc.

Hikaru Sasahara – Digital Manga, Inc.

English Edition Co-Published by:

TAIYOH TOSHO PUBLISHING CO., LTD.

3-3-9 Nishikanda

Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 101-0065

Japan

www.bs-garden.com

DIGITAL MANGA PUBLISHING

A division of DIGITAL MANGA, Inc.

1487 W 178th Street, Suite 300

Gardena, CA 90248

USA

www.dmpbooks.com

www.junemanga.com

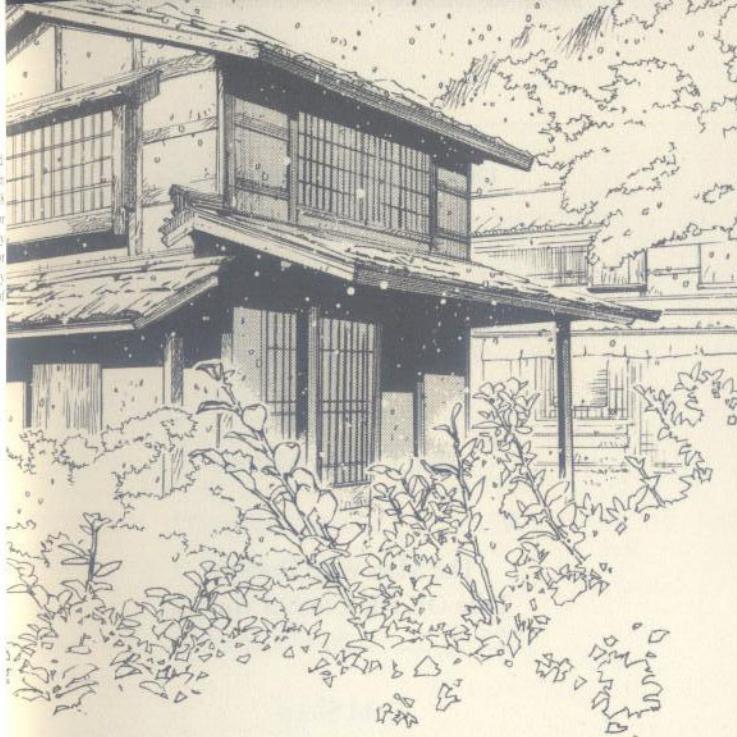
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available Upon Request

First Edition: July 2008

ISBN-13: 978-1-56970-712-8

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in China



Gentle Cage
優しい檻



Other novels published by
JUNÉ

Only The Ring Finger Knows vol.1
The Lonely Ring Finger

Don't Worry Mama

The Man Who Doesn't
Take Off His Clothes vol.1-2

Cold Sleep

Little Darling

Ai No Kusabi – The Space Between
Vol.1- Stranger

Sweet Admiration

Better Than A Dream

Contents

Gentle Cage.....9

Gentle Color.....223

Afterword.....239

Chapter 1

For the first time, Itsuki Hashimoto would be able to see the house in real life.

He'd been driving up the mountain for so long, the road now almost seemed flat to him. As he drove carefully through the heavy snow fall, Itsuki's brow furrowed. The road looked old and cracked, edged with white lines that were mostly worn away. There was no space on the sides for walking, just thick green brush that ran into the forest.

Did he already pass the house? Maybe the directions were wrong. Maybe it was that one over there. Maybe he completely missed it.

Should he turn around and go back?

Itsuki scanned the road ahead. It was impossible to see into the forest, but it was hard to believe a house could actually exist back there.

Judging by the road signs, he was on the right track, and as the winding road continued, he decided to push on to the mountain's summit.

Feeling a bit lost, Itsuki stepped on the accelerator. Suddenly, the road opened up before him. He couldn't see beyond the trees in the forest, but he could clearly see the surrounding area. It looked like the land had once been rice paddies, but had been neglected for quite some time. Only tall pale grass swayed there now.

In the middle of this scene, a mysterious old farmhouse appeared. Itsuki pulled over to the shoulder, double-checked his map, and breathed a sigh of relief.

He'd driven the company car many times before, but never by himself for two and a half hours. Suddenly he realized how nervous he'd been. His fingers ached as they gripped the steering wheel. Though it was freezing cold outside, his palms were sweaty and he knew then that the bad weather wasn't the only reason for his anxiety.

Itsuki glanced in the rear-view mirror. As usual, some of his long black hair had worked loose from his ponytail. He had started growing his hair eight years ago. Now it was all the way down his back, an unusual length for a man. But by now, he was used to being stared at in public.

Though it might sound ridiculous to an outsider, Itsuki's employer wouldn't let him cut his hair. Once a month, Itsuki snipped off the ends, making sure his hair looked neat and tidy.

As he fixed his ponytail in the mirror, Itsuki noticed that his face looked rather pinched. He adjusted his tie and stepped on the accelerator again. Turning on his blinkers, he entered the garden in front of the house. He parked carefully, making sure not to block the RV already parked there, then got out of the car with his briefcase.

Only in the country would you find a garden this big, with so many different types of trees. Some were even taller than the house, and must have been here before the owner had bought the place. Most of the

trees and shrubs had lost their leaves by now, and were covered with a blanket of snow. The wintry landscape looked both desolate and beautiful.

After admiring the garden, Itsuki approached the front door. Standing under the eaves, he brushed the snow from his sleeves and rang the doorbell, which looked strangely new compared to the rest of the house.

Itsuki waited, but no one answered. He rang the bell again, but he couldn't hear it inside the house. Maybe the power was out. He glanced up at the wooden nameplate, crudely carved with the name "Masatsugu Tokiwa."

He suddenly recalled that the black RV was only dusted with snow. He thought back to the general store where he'd stopped for directions half an hour ago.

"You're looking for Tokiwa, eh? The artist who lives on the mountain?" the shopkeeper had said. "Just drive all the way to the top. It's a big house, you can't miss it. If an RV's parked in the garden, someone should be home."

The middle-aged shopkeeper had been surprised by Itsuki's stylish appearance.

"Are you a man or a woman?" he inquired, looking at Itsuki with fascination. The area had once been a popular vacation spot, so the man was used to strangers. Maybe that was why Tokiwa had built his workshop here.

Should I just turn back? Itsuki wondered. Suddenly, he heard a sound from inside the house. He stood up straight as the door opened.

"Hashimoto?" a tall man gasped, squinting at Itsuki.

Itsuki hadn't seen Tokiwa in ages. He had expected that reaction so he politely bowed his head.

"Sorry for coming by without warning," he said sincerely. "But can I speak to you for a moment?"

"Are you alone?" Tokiwa muttered, looking at Itsuki like he was some bizarre creature.

"Yes," Itsuki assured him.

"What about Kasaoka? Yamabe-sensei didn't come with you?" Tokiwa persisted in asking.

"Kasaoka is home with Yamabe-sensei," Itsuki explained. "He didn't want to leave him alone. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I'm just surprised they let you do something all by yourself."

There was a teasing frankness to Tokiwa's tone that left Itsuki at a loss for words.

Yasuyuki Yamabe, the noted sculptor and businessman, had two personal secretaries. Itsuki was the junior assistant, handling scheduling and various errands while Kasaoka was Yamabe's senior assistant and Itsuki's supervisor. No wonder Tokiwa thought it was strange for Itsuki to travel alone, but Itsuki still felt bothered by Tokiwa's snide tone.

Nevertheless, Itsuki's job always came first before his hurt feelings. He raised his chin and looked up at Tokiwa.

"I travel on my own when necessary," he said. "I came here today at Yamabe's request."

Tokiwa suddenly looked bored.

"So what brings you here?" he asked. "What did they send you to do all by yourself?"

"I have a message from Yamabe," Itsuki answered.

"So you just dropped by?" Tokiwa said in an astonished tone. "What would you have done if I wasn't here?"

Itsuki took an envelope from his briefcase and handed it to Tokiwa. He kept quiet as Tokiwa studied the envelope and broke the seal with one long finger.

Masatsugu Tokiwa was an up-and-coming young sculptor whose fame just kept growing. He had worked abroad for some time and had even received a coveted award for his work. Before going off on his own, Tokiwa had been one of Yamabe's students and they still kept in touch.

Which was why Kasaoka had told Itsuki he wouldn't need an appointment to see Tokiwa. Itsuki wondered if that was wise, but did as told.

Tokiwa liked Yamabe as a sculptor, but not as a man. He never made any effort to contact Yamabe. So even if Itsuki had tried to make an appointment with him, Tokiwa probably would have refused.

Tokiwa drew his eyebrows together and focused his attention on the letter. Itsuki held his breath, watching Tokiwa's harsh profile. The last time they had seen each other was six months ago, at the opening of a mutual friend's art show. Tokiwa had said hello to Yamabe, then avoided him for the rest of the evening. Though Itsuki had been with Yamabe that night, Tokiwa and Itsuki rarely talked to each other one-on-one.

"So? What do you expect me to do?" Tokiwa grumbled, after glaring at the letter for awhile.

"Could we convince you to meet with Yamabe? We've made all of the necessary arrangements," Itsuki replied in a businesslike fashion.

"Right now?" Tokiwa asked.

"Sorry," Itsuki said, "but Yamabe needs to see you as soon as possible."

"No way. Who do you think you are, pressuring me like this? Go home," Tokiwa barked, shoving the letter back at Itsuki.

"But Tokiwa-sensei!" Itsuki pleaded.

"Yamabe-sensei has no reason to interrupt my work like this, and I'm under no obligation to obey him," Tokiwa growled. "I do things on my own terms."

"But—" Itsuki began.

"Yamabe-sensei has lots of fools at his beck and call. Why not bother one of them instead? Someone like you, perhaps?" Tokiwa snapped, throwing Itsuki an icy glare.

Itsuki suddenly felt as if his heart had been frozen. Unable to move or respond, he watched as the door slammed in his face.

Itsuki sighed. This was a fool's errand, plain and simple. No use trying to persuade Tokiwa now, not in his bad mood. Maybe tomorrow would be better. He could hole up at a business hotel in a nearby town. It was only four in the afternoon, still early enough to find lodging for the night.

He had never expected Tokiwa to go along willingly. Neither had Yamabe nor Kasaoka.

"It's okay if he puts up a fight," they had told him.

Itsuki refolded the letter and returned it to his briefcase. As he turned away from the house, something suddenly caught his attention. He gasped in awe. Huge, fluffy snowflakes were floating to the ground. He caught one in his palm and watched it melt.

The snow crunched beneath his feet as he walked back to the car. Seeing his footprints in the snow gave him a creepy feeling for some reason. Just then, he spotted a barn in the distance which seemed to be calling out to him.

He stood next to Tokiwa's RV. A little stream flowed behind the barn, surrounded by rocks and bare soil. Walking carefully through the snowdrifts, Itsuki made his way to the stream's edge, then squatted and touched the water.

The shopkeeper had told him that Tokiwa's house was "at the top of the mountain," but the actual peak was clearly some distance away. The icy water flowed down from the summit, cold enough to pierce his skin. Itsuki felt nostalgic as he listened to the gurgling sound. It had been a long time since he'd been alone like this.

Itsuki had started working for Yamabe eight years ago. Since then, he'd practically never left the man's side. Sometimes, Itsuki would go off for an hour or two to attend to business, but he always returned immediately afterwards. He never went for walks just

because he felt like it.

Itsuki just crouched there, watching the water for a while. When he finally stood up, he could feel the bracing cold through his coat. The falling snow had already covered his footsteps. He carefully picked his way back to the black RV, then surveyed Tokiwa's house again.

Tokiwa had originally bought this old place to serve as his workshop and residence. It was easy to tell the house's age from the rough texture of the wood on the porch. But it didn't really look worn out, just well loved and much used. "Rustic" described it perfectly. Surrounded by mountains and drifting snow, the house was quite picturesque.

Itsuki knew Yamabe would never understand this, though. When it came to property, Yamabe only cared about the important things: the age, name, and location of the place. Unlike Tokiwa, Yamabe preferred new things, untouched by human hands, another reason why they didn't get along.

I'd better get a move on, Itsuki thought, stifling a cough. He glanced at his watch. A whole hour had passed since he'd arrived here.

The company car was not suited for driving in heavy snow, and Itsuki felt stressed about driving down the icy road again. Aiming to get back to town as soon as possible, he hurried to his car.

Suddenly, he froze. Where were his keys? He thought he'd stashed them in his coat pocket, though he wasn't the type of guy who usually carried things in his pockets. Since he didn't really drive much, he wasn't in

the habit of carrying keys around either.

He tried to retrace his steps, but still couldn't remember what he'd done with them. Did he drop them in the garden somewhere?

Now the snow was falling even harder, covering everything—including his coat—with a soft white crust. If he didn't hurry, the roads would soon freeze over. Itsuki started digging a trail through the snow with his shoe, still searching for the keys. By the time he reached the barn, he decided it would be easier to just walk down the mountain.

But he couldn't just leave the car there. For one thing, it didn't belong to him. Plus, it would be rude to leave it in Tokiwa's garden, especially after the way the man had acted. Itsuki shuffled towards the little stream, his breath emerging in white puffs, but as he feared, it was completely covered in snow. The water was barely visible, making it hard to tell which part was solid.

He nervously approached the bank. The air here felt even colder than in the garden, and he began to shiver uncontrollably.

The keys must be around here, he thought. Just then, the rock beneath him crumbled. As Itsuki slipped, still clutching his briefcase, he fell down hard on his right side. A sharp pain shot up his leg, so bad it made his ears ring.

Itsuki lay sprawled on the ground. He felt the freezing cold seep into his body. As he raised himself up on his hands, he saw that his situation was indeed dire. Both of his legs were soaked from the knees down. Just looking at them made him feel even colder than he already was.

The feeling of his wet slacks clinging to his legs made it all too real. As he tried to lift his right leg out of the river, a violent pain pierced through his entire body. He gasped for breath, trying hard not to scream.

Suddenly, he heard a voice from nearby say, "What the hell are you doing over there?"

He looked over to see Tokiwa fixing him with a steely gaze. Itsuki started to apologize, but Tokiwa abruptly cut him off.

"Don't apologize! Just tell me what's going on here," the sculptor said gruffly.

In a panic, Itsuki tried to climb out, but his legs just wouldn't cooperate and he slid deeper into the water. Now even his knees tingled with cold.

"Stay still!" Tokiwa commanded in an angry voice. "Do you want to fall in even more?"

Itsuki felt two strong arms grasp him from behind and lift him out of the water. Lying on the snow, his soaked legs spread before him, he was too breathless to apologize or even say thanks.

"Why did you come out here anyway, in this foul weather?" Tokiwa yelled. "You really—"

Suddenly Tokiwa fell silent. For a moment, he looked like he was about to leave Itsuki to fend for himself.

"You'd better come with me, I guess," he finally muttered. "You can't drive home in that state."

Then he turned around and started to walk away. He was wearing the same jeans and sweater as before, topped with a leather jacket.

How did he know I fell in? Itsuki wondered,

watching Tokiwa walk away.

But Itsuki was in no mood for analytical thinking right now. He planted his hand in the snow and tried to get up, but his legs buckled under him. He couldn't even stand on his own, let alone chase after Tokiwa. Both ankles burned as if they'd been set on fire, and his bones hurt all over. Even the slightest movements made his body scream in pain.

Itsuki let out a low moan. The places where his wet clothes touched his skin already felt numb. As the chill spread up his back to his shoulders, his teeth began to chatter. He heard footsteps approach as he contemplated his pathetic state.

"It's your legs, right? Both of them?"

Itsuki looked up. Tokiwa kneeled down next to him, grimacing.

"No, I'm fine. I can walk," Itsuki insisted, forcing a smile. He stretched out his knees. Pain coursed through his legs, though he didn't cry out.

Tokiwa hoisted Itsuki up by his shoulders, sitting him upright on the snow, then grimly grasped his ankles.

"Aaggh!" Itsuki gasped, clenching his teeth.

"Can't take it, eh?" Tokiwa scoffed.

Shaking off Tokiwa, Itsuki tried to balance on his left leg, but suddenly found himself floating above the ground, held up by Tokiwa's strong arms.

"Don't struggle, okay?" Tokiwa said, sounding annoyed. "Do you want to hurt yourself again?"

Itsuki felt dazed by the scenery racing past him and the feeling of Tokiwa's soft leather jacket beneath

his fingers. Soon, Tokiwa was gently placing Itsuki in the RV's passenger seat.

Itsuki already knew their body types were different—he had a delicate build, while Tokiwa's resembled a construction worker's—but was still amazed at how easily Tokiwa had carried him to the car.

Tokiwa blotted Itsuki's pants with a towel, rolled them to his knees, and wrapped his lower legs in another towel he grabbed from the back seat.

"Please, Tokiwa-sensei, I can take care of myself," Itsuki pleaded weakly.

"How, when you can't even walk?" Tokiwa said quietly, fastening Itsuki's seatbelt. He got in the driver's seat and started the car without another word.

Itsuki wondered where they were going, but he didn't feel comfortable asking Tokiwa. Every twist and turn on the downhill road made his legs feel even worse. He just looked out the windshield as the wipers brushed away the powdery snow.



Chapter 2

Tokiwa took Itsuki to a private hospital in the town at the foot of the mountain. A nurse immediately put Itsuki on a wheelchair and took him to an exam room.

"Your left ankle is just sprained, but your right one is broken," the middle-aged doctor said, sounding official. "We'll put both of them in casts, though. Since your left one's in much better shape, the cast won't be on as long."

The doctor quickly set both ankles, then put Itsuki back on the wheelchair.

"Don't put any weight on the right side for now," the doctor warned. "You can put a little weight on the left, but be careful, it's a pretty bad sprain. You had a lot of internal bleeding, so the ligaments are probably hurt. If you seem to be healing too slowly or something unusual happens, come back right away."

"Thanks a lot," Itsuki said, nodding his head. An orderly wheeled him back to the reception area, which was already closed for the night. The spacious waiting room was empty, illuminated by a single light.

"Excuse me! I'd like to pay the bill," Itsuki called out.

"I took care of it. I'll give you the receipt later," Tokiwa said curtly.

"Uh, sorry about all this," Itsuki mumbled. Tokiwa had a right to be pissed, after all the hassle he'd been through.

Tokiwa was quiet on the way back up the mountain. He never even glanced at Itsuki in the passenger seat. There was no sign of the snow stopping and the forest now looked completely white. Finally, the old farmhouse became visible.

"You know why all this happened, right? You were playing around in the snow instead of going straight home," Tokiwa said dryly.

"But your garden is so beautiful," Itsuki said without thinking. Tokiwa looked doubtful, but Itsuki continued on. "Yamabe's garden is lovely, but in an artificial way. I've never really liked it much. Your garden is *truly* beautiful."

"Don't tell Yamabe that. His landscape gardener would cry," Tokiwa said with a faint smile, surprised by Itsuki's boldness. "Besides, there's no point in comparing Yamabe's manicured plot with my wild mess."

Back at the house, Tokiwa lifted Itsuki into the wheelchair. The snowdrifts were so white, they could be seen clearly even at night. Itsuki nervously glanced over his shoulder as Tokiwa pushed him toward the front door.

"Uhhh," he stammered, his voice sounding very loud to himself. "Sorry to cause you so much trouble. I should go home now."

Tokiwa stopped, snorting with laughter. He pointedly looked down at Itsuki's legs. "You can't drive with those things! How do you plan on getting home?"

"You could call a taxi for me," Itsuki suggested helpfully. "I'll pick up the car later, if that's okay with you."

"No taxi will come up here in this blizzard," Tokiwa said tiredly, gazing at the garden. "Most of them don't have snow tires. Any other ideas?"

Itsuki kept quiet.

"If you can't bear staying with me, try one of my neighbors," Tokiwa snapped. "Or sleep outside and freeze, I don't care. There's another house a little way down the hill. You won't get very far on those legs, though."

Too late, Itsuki thought. He should have called a taxi as soon as he'd lost his keys, or asked Tokiwa to take him to the station after the hospital. He could have been home by now.

"Um, could I please stay here tonight?" Itsuki asked meekly.

Tokiwa wheeled Itsuki into the warm living room, spread a blanket over the sofa, and then helped Itsuki out of the wheelchair. After Itsuki was settled, Tokiwa gave him some dry pajamas.

"You can leave the oil heater on if you want to," Tokiwa directed, "and here's an extra blanket. If you need more help, just call me."

"Thank you. Sorry again to be so much trouble," Itsuki said with embarrassment. Tokiwa nodded and turned to leave.

"Tokiwa-sensei!" Itsuki suddenly called out. He flinched as Tokiwa gave him a cold look, but made himself say what he'd wanted to say for months. "Thank

you for the flowers you sent. My mother would have loved them. Sorry I didn't thank you sooner."

Tokiwa had sent flowers to the funeral home when Itsuki's mother passed away last autumn. Itsuki was shocked to see Tokiwa's name on the simple arrangement of pure white lilies. After 49 days had passed, Itsuki sent Tokiwa the customary thank you gift but never had the chance to thank him in person. He had been feeling bad about that.

Tokiwa fell silent at Itsuki's words. After a moment, he spoke in a soft tone. "I heard your sister got married."

"Yes. She found a good husband, and was married last spring," Itsuki replied, feeling surprised at Tokiwa's unexpected remark. Tokiwa knew Itsuki had a sister, and had been raised by a single mother. But why should Tokiwa even care?

Tokiwa gave him another blank look, then left the living room. When he didn't return, Itsuki assumed he had gone to bed.

Itsuki spent the night curled up on the sofa fighting the urge to cry out in pain. He needed painkillers, but he didn't have any. Though his legs felt crushed inside the casts, he finally managed to drift off to sleep.

In the middle of the night, Tokiwa came back to check on Itsuki. He propped him up on the couch and gave him some medicine. Itsuki downed the pills with a glass of water and soon felt a little more relaxed. Tokiwa

lowered him to the sofa again, then wiped his forehead with a damp cloth. Itsuki quickly went back to sleep.

Itsuki opened his eyes again at dawn, confused by memories of the previous night. Did Tokiwa really take care of him? Or was all that a dream?

Itsuki noticed a glass and jug of water on the end table. He was still damp with sweat, but the pain in his legs had eased up a bit. He rested on his side and stared up at the dark ceiling. He still couldn't believe he was actually in Tokiwa's house.

Tokiwa had returned to Japan almost a year ago, but they hadn't really spoken to each other until yesterday.

At seven, Tokiwa appeared with a breakfast tray, wearing the same glum expression as yesterday. He set down the tray near Itsuki, who felt embarrassed by this unexpected kindness, and helped the man into his wheelchair.

Itsuki didn't really feel like eating, and Tokiwa seemed to pick up on this.

"You haven't had anything since last night," he scolded. "Get a little something in your stomach, then you can take more painkillers."

"Thank you." Itsuki nodded, picking up his chopsticks. He noticed a round white pill at the corner of the tray, and flashed back to Tokiwa's mission of mercy in the middle of the night. Itsuki forced himself to clean his plate as Tokiwa watched from nearby. The brisk, acid taste of tomato vegetable soup made Itsuki's throat feel much better.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Itsuki asked in the

middle of his meal.

"Don't you worry," Tokiwa spat out. "I always take care of myself first. Too many fools suffer until they're sweating bullets."

Itsuki suddenly realized that his memories were indeed real. Tokiwa took the empty tray and got up.

"Thank you," Itsuki said. "And sorry again for all your trouble. But—"

Itsuki hesitated as Tokiwa looked at him wearily.

Now what? Tokiwa seemed to be thinking.

"Could I use your phone?" Itsuki finally asked. "My cell seems to be broken."

He'd already pressed the power button a hundred times, but it still wouldn't turn on. It was covered in dents and scratches and must have gotten damaged when he fell. Tokiwa left for a moment, then returned with a cordless model. He silently handed it to Itsuki and walked away.

"Thanks," Itsuki uttered to Tokiwa's back, dialing Kasaoka's number.

Kasaoka picked up immediately. Itsuki explained what happened, including the broken cellphone, and apologized for not calling sooner. Kasaoka also seemed surprised by Tokiwa's behavior.

"Guess you needed extreme measures to get through to him," he said, laughing bitterly. "No need to hurry home, though. Just tell Tokiwa the meeting with Yamabe will only take an hour or two. Get him to come back with you, okay?"

"I don't think he'll listen to me," Itsuki

whispered. "It would be easier if you came—"

"Pfft! That would make no difference whatsoever," Kasaoka interrupted. "You've been close to Tokiwa in the past, you're the best person to deal with him now."

"But that was..." Itsuki started to say before he caught himself. He really wanted to leave his personal business out of this. "That was a very long time ago," he continued quietly. "Things are different now."

He left it at that, wondering what Kasaoka would think. A moment passed before Kasaoka spoke again.

"At any rate, I can't leave Yamabe-sensei right now," Kasaoka finally said. "If we wait much longer, it'll be too late. Try to win Tokiwa over during the next two weeks."

"Two weeks?" Itsuki gasped. Would he really be here that long?

"The sooner the better," Kasaoka said. "If you need to, stay at a local hotel and keep on working on him. But until then, don't use Tokiwa's home phone. Wait until you're at a hotel to contact me again."

"Right," Itsuki replied, and then hung up the phone.

He thought back to yesterday, and his last meeting with Yamabe. The sensei was nearly 60, but looked at least 20 years younger than his real age. His hair was still so black, he didn't need to dye it, and the sharp features of his face left a distinct impression. Yamabe's voice still sounded strong and commanding, and tended to dominate every conversation he was involved in. The sensei hated it when strangers acted overly familiar with

him, and never indulged in lighthearted socializing with his staff.

As Itsuki gazed at the now-dead phone, he decided to get Tokiwa to Yamabe as soon as possible.

Just like Tokiwa said, no way could he drive in his current condition. Itsuki might be able to rent a car with hand controls, but the thought of driving another person down that treacherous mountain road frankly terrified him.

He didn't dare tell Kasaoka the extent of his injuries, or Kasaoka would have rushed to help him. Itsuki hated to have his supervisor worry about him especially since he was completely to blame for this predicament.

At any rate, the fact remained that he was stuck here until the snow melted. He would check the road reports the next day to see if he could call a taxi. Right now, that seemed to be his only option.

"Are you done yet?" Tokiwa suddenly asked, startling Itsuki.

When did he come back in here? Itsuki thought. Tokiwa gave him the same blank look as before. Itsuki quickly handed him the receiver.

"Sorry to monopolize your phone. But thanks for letting me use it," Itsuki said politely. He swallowed hard, preparing himself. It was now or never time. "Uh, Tokiwa-sensei? Do you think you could visit Yamabe-sensei pretty soon?" he asked tentatively.

Tokiwa raised his eyebrows, but didn't respond.

"It wouldn't take long," Itsuki reasoned. "Half a

day at most. They'll send you home in a cab afterwards. I know you're really busy, but I'm begging you."

"Today, or even tomorrow, would be physically impossible," Tokiwa stated firmly. "The blizzard is still raging, the roads are iced over, and I've heard there's an accident near the station. A taxi would never come here now."

"We could go after the snow melts," Itsuki suggested hopefully. "Call a taxi and visit Yamabe. That okay with you?"

Tokiwa just laughed sarcastically.

"Help yourself to whatever's in the kitchen," he said curtly, walking away. "Just stay away from my bedroom and my studio."

Itsuki's heart felt heavy as he watched Tokiwa leave.

Maybe if Kasaoka asked him, he thought again.

Everybody trusted Kasaoka, even the young artists who were Yamabe's students. Once, when Yamabe had thrown out a wayward apprentice, Kasaoka had managed to talk him into taking the kid back. Kasaoka listened to all sides, and always tried to be fair. When Yamabe called Kasaoka "a man to be trusted," he was telling the absolute truth.

On the other hand, Yamabe's apprentices didn't trust Itsuki whatsoever, even as a member of the household staff. It was only natural. Since he was never allowed to speak to them directly, Itsuki had never really bonded with anyone. Even though Itsuki had worked for Yamabe for the past eight years, that didn't count for much in the greater scheme of things.

Itsuki wheeled his chair towards the window and looked outside. The snow was still coming down hard and drifting across the landscape.

Why can't I just tell Kasaoka everything, Itsuki thought bitterly.

There was a time when he had called Tokiwa friend. But now Tokiwa hated Itsuki, or so it seemed. It was "supreme indifference" a better way of putting it. Tokiwa could be blunt, but he was seldom mean. Maybe he only acted that way around Itsuki.

Itsuki sighed as he gazed at the snow-covered world. It felt like snow was falling in his heart, too.

Chapter 3

It snowed hard all afternoon. Sitting in his wheelchair, Itsuki spent most of the day just staring out the window.

Though his workshop was similar to Yamabe's, Tokiwa didn't take on students or apprentices. No, Tokiwa was a real loner, living by himself in this obsessively-neat, sterile house. Compared to the weathered exterior, the inside had been completely renovated.

Glowing hardwood floors had been installed throughout the house, making it easy for Itsuki to get around in his wheelchair. The snow outside added a certain charm to the place, but also made it seem eerily quiet. The sound of his own breathing and the squeak of the wheelchair sounded almost deafening to Itsuki's ears.

Heading down the hall in search of the bathroom, Itsuki looked around with interest—and was suddenly hit by a wave of nostalgia.

Just as works of art reflect the artist who made them, other things often reflect the unique touch of their creator, it's something that comes about naturally in the creative process. That said, the interior of Tokiwa's house seemed completely in tune with Tokiwa's artistic style.

In the door frames, ceilings, and even the

lights set into the walls, Itsuki recognized the "Tokiwa Aesthetic" he knew so well. Pure, straight lines edge with areas of softness. The house had the same qualities as a cherished wooden sculpture Tokiwa had once given him. Just looking at the place made Itsuki feel serene.

Tokiwa had been holed up in his studio since morning. Itsuki wondered what he was working on. He had no idea how Tokiwa spent his days, but had heard that the man sometimes taught at an art school. Itsuki suddenly felt a pang of guilt. Tokiwa had wasted precious creative time just taking care of him.

I'll call a cab as soon as it stops snowing, Itsuki decided. He would ask Tokiwa to visit Yamabe one more time. If Tokiwa refused again, Itsuki knew nothing more could be done.

Itsuki used the bathroom, then dreamily made his way back to the living room. Suddenly, something caught his eye, a room behind some sliding doors. Shelves lined the walls, stacked with tools and small machines. Sculptural models and sample pieces were scattered everywhere.

This has to be his workshop, Itsuki thought, but Tokiwa was nowhere to be seen. The room had the feel of a real artist's hideaway.

Just stay away from my bedroom and my studio.

As Itsuki thought about Tokiwa's warning, his wheelchair rolled forward and hit the door. Just as he was about to turn around, Itsuki spotted something familiar.

A blue watercolor in a narrow silver frame

Itsuki vividly remembered its bright tones. Why was this here?

He moved towards it without thinking. Soon, he was in the middle of the studio, holding the painting he knew so well.

Itsuki had painted it so long ago. And now, Tokiwa had decorated his studio with it? Itsuki looked at the painting in a daze, until a harsh voice brought him back to reality.

"What are you doing here? I told you to stay out!" Tokiwa growled, reaching out to grab the painting.

Itsuki timidly looked up at Tokiwa, who glared back at him. Then Tokiwa roughly yanked the wheelchair out of the studio and back into the hall.

"Wait! I can—" Itsuki pleaded, pointing back at the studio. Tokiwa didn't stop pushing the wheelchair until Itsuki was back in the living room.

"B-but, why? That picture was from so long ago..." Itsuki stammered before he could stop himself. He had painted that picture way back when he had been a vocational school student. Back when he'd first known Tokiwa.

Tokiwa had asked for the painting, so Itsuki had given it to him as a present. But that was eight long years ago. Itsuki never expected to see it in Tokiwa's studio.

"Yes. It was a long time ago," Tokiwa said in a low voice, sending shivers down Itsuki's spine. Tokiwa moved closer, giving Itsuki a look so sharp it seemed to cut right through him.

"You asked me to visit Yamabe," Tokiwa

muttered. "But do you know why he wants me Hashimoto? And if you do know, do you really want to take me there?"

"I know he has business that concerns you," Itsuki admitted. "Yamabe told me directly."

"Did you know that Yamabe has terminal cancer, and only a few months to live?" Tokiwa pushed on. "He intends to leave everything to me. Did you know all that?"

Itsuki nodded sadly.

Yamabe had started feeling ill the previous spring.

"I must be getting old," Yamabe had said. "I just can't get up in the morning and I feel tired all the time."

Itsuki had never heard such words from Yamabe, who was unusually energetic for his age. Kasaoka was concerned, too, and they both begged Yamabe to go for a check-up.

Yamabe airily refused, laughing it off as much ado about nothing. But by late autumn, Yamabe himself finally decided to go to the hospital. Itsuki stood by as the sensei went through a battery of tests. The results came back a week later: terminal cancer.

Itsuki sat beside Yamabe as the doctor delivered the bad news. From start to finish, Yamabe kept a straight face, asking the doctor a slew of questions. When they returned home, Itsuki explained everything to Kasaoka.

"He'll need to put his affairs in order," Kasaoka said soberly. "He can't leave this up to chance. At the very least, he'll need to make a will."

Itsuki didn't know what to say, but Yamabe did.

"Leave everything to Itsuki," the sensei insisted. Itsuki dearly wanted to beg off, but how could he?

Like Tokiwa, Yamabe had always been a loner, with no wife, children, or other close ties. Yamabe had been involved with many women over the years, but none of them had given him children, and he'd lost contact with his distant relatives years ago.

Later on, Yamabe backtracked and instead announced that he would leave his workshop—and everything else—to Tokiwa.

"I need to discuss this with him in person," Yamabe said. "Tell him to come here."

Itsuki had had no choice but to agree, and left for Tokiwa's house the same day.

"Yamabe's workshop is a nice chunk of real estate," Tokiwa said, suddenly sounding more interested. "He also directs a company and owns a lot of stocks. He'll pay all the fees and inheritance taxes, and if I don't want the assets I can sell them."

This was all news to Itsuki, but he couldn't bring himself to speak up. Instead, he sat there feeling hurt. Tokiwa gave him another sharp look.

"You satisfied with this?" he snapped.

It was a rhetorical question, so Itsuki held back for a while. After an uncomfortable moment, he finally spoke. "It's Yamabe's decision, for better or worse. I'm not in a position to have an opinion on the matter."

"So it's a question of your position, huh?" Tokiwa teased. "Exactly how long will you stay by his side?"

"For as long as he needs me. That is my duty,"

Itsuki said without hesitation. He had already decided this.

Tokiwa was silent for a moment. With his arms folded across his chest, he stared at Itsuki in the wheelchair.

"So you came here knowing all this," he finally said. "You knew he said I could do whatever I want."

Itsuki just nodded.

"But will *you* let me do whatever I want? That's the big question here," Tokiwa said pointedly. The mood in the room was quickly changing.

Itsuki froze for a moment, and then instinctively grabbed the wheels of his wheelchair. Just as he was about to retreat, Tokiwa grabbed both arm rests and pulled the chair closer. Before Itsuki could protest, Tokiwa gave him a kiss that took his breath away.

"Nooooo!" Itsuki gasped. But was he protesting or just screaming?

As Itsuki shook his head with disbelief, Tokiwa suddenly grasped him around the neck. Itsuki tried to push him away, but Tokiwa kept nibbling on his lips.

Finally, Tokiwa stopped, giving Itsuki a chance to breathe. Itsuki felt like he was about to suffocate. Even his vision seemed blurry. He felt like he was about to float off the wheelchair, as the ceiling spun above him. Suddenly, Tokiwa lifted him up.

"Don't struggle, or I'll drop you," Tokiwa said grimly. He hoisted Itsuki over his shoulder and carried him out of the living room.

Itsuki clung to Tokiwa's broad shoulders as they hurried down the hall.

He's stronger than he seems, Itsuki realized, suddenly feeling scared. Tokiwa brought him into the bedroom and dropped him on the bed.

Itsuki cowered in fear as Tokiwa pounced on him from above. Tokiwa grabbed both of Itsuki's wrists with one hand and pinned them above his head. Holding Itsuki's chin with his other hand, Tokiwa tried to take away Itsuki's breath again.

Anticipating another kiss, Itsuki turned his head away, only to have it roughly yanked back. Tokiwa was so close, Itsuki could feel his breath, and he completely forgot how to move. Tokiwa probed Itsuki's mouth, catching his tongue with his own. First, he sucked it hard, then gently nibbled it with his teeth, making Itsuki shudder all over. Itsuki whimpered, unable to breathe, but instead of letting him go, Tokiwa just stepped up the action.

Tokiwa finally released him after another long, deep kiss. Itsuki gasped as Tokiwa moved to his neck and chin. Tokiwa covered him in kisses, and then traced one cool fingertip along Itsuki's sore lips. The pain melded with another sensation, blurring Itsuki's vision yet again.

"Ohh..." he heard himself moan as Tokiwa stroked his hips through his clothes. Suddenly, the hands wandered even lower. Itsuki trembled as he met Tokiwa's cruel gaze.

"Aah! Tokiwa-sensei! Stop!" he begged.

But Tokiwa wouldn't let go of his wrists. As Itsuki tried to twist away, Tokiwa lowered his body on top of him. Suddenly, Tokiwa's hand dove under

the waistband of Itsuki's borrowed sweatpants—and touched him *there*.

The impact was so intense, Itsuki felt as if he'd been hit on the head with a blunt object. He couldn't believe what had sprung forth from his body just now. And he had a sinking feeling about what Tokiwa had in mind next.

Tokiwa nibbled on an ear and traced its edge with his tongue. Itsuki heard a wet sound as Tokiwa bit his earlobe. Goosebumps broke out on his neck and along his spine.

"No, stop!" Itsuki pleaded. His faltering voice sounded strange even to himself, like it belonged to another person.

Stoking the flames of Itsuki's passion, Tokiwa's hand found its target with amazing accuracy. It was the first time another person had ever touched him there, and Itsuki's body responded instinctively. Tokiwa kept sucking his earlobe and his neck, making Itsuki squirm.

Itsuki knew there was no turning back now. As the sensation grew more and more intense, his body tingled with heat. He lacked the strength to push Tokiwa away and instead clutched at the sheets in futility.

"Tokiwa-sensei, please stop—we need to talk!" Itsuki cried out, but Tokiwa just ignored his pleas.

These same hands had once created a work of art that Itsuki loved and cherished. It made him sick to have Tokiwa touch him down there with those exact same fingers.

As Tokiwa quickly moved his hand, Itsuki was unable to suppress his moans. He felt tormented by this

fever that was getting hotter every minute. Itsuki's voice became a wail, but that still didn't stop Tokiwa. Now Itsuki babbled incoherently, begging Tokiwa to release him, until he finally exploded right into Tokiwa's hand.

"Aaaaaah!"

As Itsuki listened to his own ragged breathing, his entire body pulsed and tingled. Suddenly, he heard the rustle of clothes being taken off. He turned his head and gasped at the sight.

Tokiwa was on his knees, straddling Itsuki as he stripped off his sweater. Seeing Tokiwa's broad shoulders and supple physique made Itsuki shiver all over. Before his brain had a chance to think, his body moved, struggling to get out from under Tokiwa.

Itsuki managed to swing his legs off the bed. As his feet hit the floor, his legs felt like they'd just been struck with a hammer. He doubled over in pain and collapsed on the floor. There was a terrible ringing in his ears. He curled into a ball, trying not to cry out. Through his bleary eyes, he saw a pair of legs. Tokiwa quietly picked him up and put him back on the bed. Tokiwa looked really pissed off, though his touch was gentle. Itsuki flinched as Tokiwa carefully positioned his injured legs.

"Do I disgust you that much?" Tokiwa hissed.

Even though he knew Tokiwa hated him, Itsuki had never heard Tokiwa use that tone before. It made his heart ache to realize how truly indifferent Tokiwa actually felt toward him.

"You're just another piece of property to me," Tokiwa sneered, glaring with rage. "The sooner you

realize that, the better off you'll be. You've tried to escape from me before, remember?"

Why is he acting like this? Itsuki thought desperately, unable to speak.

He knew that people automatically assumed he was Yamabe's lover. Since Itsuki was very intimately involved in Yamabe's life, people just put two and two together. As Yamabe's employee, Itsuki could never be sure what Yamabe was really thinking. That was the reality of Itsuki's situation. It had nothing to do with Tokiwa.

"Yeah. You disgust me that much," Itsuki finally replied. He threw a pillow at Tokiwa and spun his legs around again, ignoring the searing pain. He was definitely getting out of here, even if he had to crawl. He heard Tokiwa clicking his tongue in disapproval.

Tokiwa grabbed Itsuki's arm and roughly pulled him onto the bed again. He straddled Itsuki's thighs, pinning him down, then bound his wrists together with a piece of cloth. Itsuki's head swirled with pain and confusion. The Tokiwa before him now was so different from the Tokiwa he'd known in the past.

"Tokiwa-sensei! Why are you doing this?" Itsuki gasped.

"Stop struggling, you'll just hurt yourself. Now be a good boy and turn over," Tokiwa said bluntly.

Itsuki violently shook his head. Tokiwa kissed him deeply, then forced his clenched teeth apart with a finger. Itsuki could taste tobacco as their tongues tangled in a deep kiss. Feeling faint from holding his breath, he gasped for air when Tokiwa finally released him.

Tokiwa's hands darted under Itsuki's shirt and caressed his stomach and chest. As Tokiwa planted a trail of kisses down his torso, Itsuki's skin started to respond. Tokiwa pulled down Itsuki's sweatpants and stroked his thighs with a cold hand. Itsuki knew Tokiwa wouldn't stop now. He felt the blood drain from his body.

His useless struggles had left him utterly exhausted, while his right leg throbbed in its cast. But he still felt himself going erect as his blood pulsated in his ears. Unable to move, Itsuki endured Tokiwa's biting kisses on his stomach, knowing that Tokiwa was headed further south.

Reaching out with his large hand, Tokiwa softly grasped Itsuki's member, which was completely engorged from constant stimulation. Itsuki shivered as Tokiwa's long finger searched for the opening between his cheeks. He opened his mouth to protest, but Tokiwa silenced him with another kiss.

The fingers that had created Itsuki's favorite work of art now penetrated that unspeakable place, heightening his passion.

"No, no," Itsuki said hoarsely as Tokiwa raised his knees and lifted him up. As Tokiwa entered him, Itsuki experienced a mixture of intense arousal and fierce pain. He felt completely detached from his body, as if it was not his own.

Unable to make a sound, Itsuki gasped for breath. Tokiwa gently bit Itsuki's lip and explored the depths of his mouth. There was nothing Itsuki could do. It was hopeless to protest.

I'm just a doll to them, Itsuki thought dully. First

to Yamabe, now to Tokiwa. He should have known all along, but this sudden realization hit him like a blow to the chest.

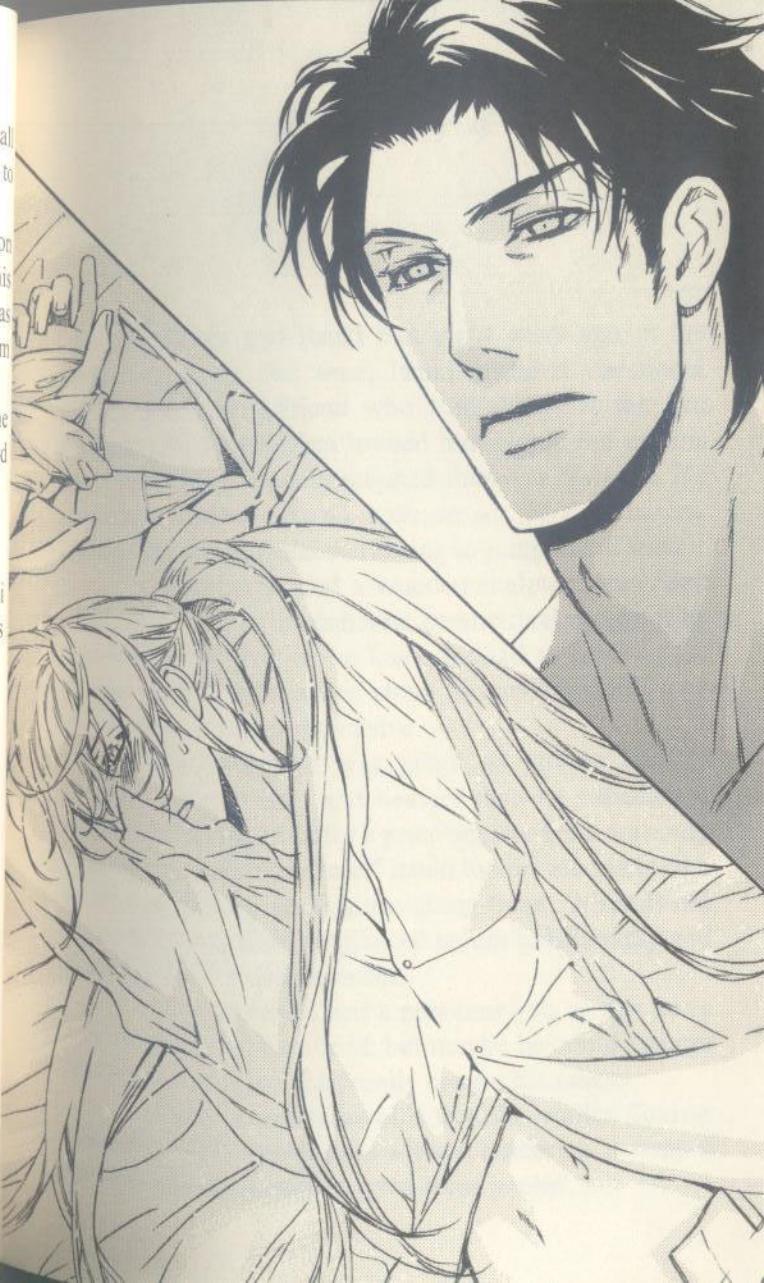
Held tightly by Tokiwa's long arms, riding on wave after wave of pleasure, Itsuki felt the insides of his eyelids get hot, like he was about to cry. He knew it was strange for a doll to shed tears, so he bravely held them back, staring at his captor with blurry eyes.

Who is this person? he wondered idly. From the depths of his hazy consciousness, Itsuki suddenly heard his name.

"Itsuki, Itsuki," Tokiwa crooned.

He didn't call me Hashimoto, Itsuki thought.

As Tokiwa's lips gently grazed his own, Itsuki remembered their very first kiss, back in those days when they were still friends.



Chapter 4

Tokiwa and Itsuki met eight years ago in the early spring. At that time, Itsuki attended vocational school and had a friend who sold things at the flea market. His friend often invited him along, but on this day, Itsuki had actually stopped there on his own. He leisurely strolled around with an air of detachment, waiting for that special something to jump out at him.

Soon he spotted a wooden sculpture, the head of a bird carved in an elaborate geometrical pattern. The moment Itsuki saw it, he knew he had to have it. He usually didn't feel this way about flea market stuff, so he didn't mind if it was expensive.

The sculpture was about as tall as Itsuki's shoulders were wide, and heavier than he expected it would be. He searched for a price tag, but there was only a tag that read "Totem Pole." Itsuki looked around for the seller and saw bored Tokiwa sitting there. When Itsuki asked the price, Tokiwa glanced at him indifferently and rattled off a five digit number.

Though Itsuki had a part-time job, it was more than he could really afford, but maybe he could splurge just once. This piece had really caught his fancy.

Itsuki pulled some bills from his wallet. Tokiwa handed over the totem pole without bothering to wrap it up, stuffing the money into his jeans pocket.

"Is the person who made this here today?" Itsuki inquired.

Tokiwa frowned and said nothing.

Itsuki was taken aback at first, but he really wanted to know. "Do you think they'd mind if I added some color to it?" he continued.

Now Tokiwa finally seemed interested and faced Itsuki for the first time. "You paid for it, right? Do what you like with it."

"True, but I wouldn't want to paint it if the artist would be offended," Itsuki said politely.

Itsuki had enjoyed painting from a young age. But he never really fit in with the junior high art club, and he couldn't join the high school oil painting club with no money to buy supplies. He took up watercolors after high school, but could never afford formal lessons.

Itsuki did things entirely on his own terms, using techniques he had devised himself. Because of this, he didn't want to alter another artist's work without their consent.

"Do what you like with it," Tokiwa said.

But Itsuki had purchased the piece because it had caught his eye in a special way. He didn't want to overstep his boundaries.

"Once it's sold, it's sold," Tokiwa said in an amused tone. "You paid for it, do what you want with it. Go ahead, knock yourself out."

Suddenly, Itsuki knew the mysterious creator was standing right before him.

Tokiwa left a strong first impression that day, but Itsuki assumed he'd never see him again. So he was

pleasantly surprised to see the same surly face a few weeks later, at a flea market a few towns away.

Tokiwa seemed to remember his face when he stopped by his booth to say hello.

"Did you paint it yet?" Tokiwa asked.

Itsuki nodded.

"What color?" Tokiwa inquired.

Itsuki thought for a minute, and then took out the sketchbook he always carried. He quickly sketched the totem pole, then filled it in with colored pencil.

He had to show Tokiwa right now, since there was no guarantee he'd ever run into him again. Itsuki wanted to show him the colors he'd used.

But Itsuki soon realized that Tokiwa was just being polite. When Itsuki offered to show him his sketchbook, Tokiwa raised his eyebrows in an exaggerated way. To an artist as talented as Tokiwa, Itsuki's sketches must look like the work of a rank amateur. Itsuki's cheeks burned, and he felt a strong urge to flee.

For a moment, Tokiwa said nothing, then he finally spoke in a deep voice. "Where do you live?"

"Huh?" asked Itsuki dumbly.

Tokiwa fixed him with an intense gaze.

"I'd like to see this place in reality," he said, pointing at a sketch made outdoors. "Can you show it to me sometime?"

Then he pointed to the totem pole sketch.

"Will you sell this one to me?" he asked surprisingly.

Itsuki didn't mind showing Tokiwa the real life

setting for his picture, but felt strange when Tokiwa asked to buy his sketch. Though Itsuki tried to refuse, Tokiwa was shockingly persistent. In the end, they exchanged contact information, and Itsuki promised to paint another version of the totem pole for Tokiwa.

They met again a week later. Itsuki learned that Tokiwa was an art school graduate studying with a famous sculptor.

"I've never formally studied art. I'm self-taught," Itsuki said apologetically, handing Tokiwa the new watercolor. He had worried that Tokiwa might hand it back to him with disdain.

Tokiwa quietly studied Itsuki's painting, tucked between the pages of his sketchbook. Then he looked Itsuki in the eye and thanked him.

The next time they met, Tokiwa asked if he had any desire to study art.

"I'm too selfish, it would never work," Itsuki said, smiling bitterly. "I can only paint things that genuinely interest me."

Itsuki's experiences with art education were not entirely positive. The instructors frequently criticized his use of color. When the mood struck him, he often layered another color on top of the first one, creating an entirely different painting.

In school, he was limited to painting the subjects the instructor chose. In clubs, when he painted what he liked, his classmates all criticized him. As a result, Itsuki saw "painting in school" as an intensely unpleasant experience.

He eagerly filled the pages of his sketchbook,

but had never been praised for his art by anyone outside his family. These experiences had led him to view his art as "just a hobby," which was fine with him. He only painted because he loved to paint, not because he thought he was good at it. Compared to someone like Tokiwa, his art was merely child's play.

"Besides," Itsuki continued, "I like what I'm studying in school. If I started now, I'd just wind up as a mediocre artist. Maybe I'll do it later, if I have the chance."

"Whatever," Tokiwa replied.

Itsuki felt a twinge of regret.

"Forgive me. It was very nice of you to suggest it," he said politely.

"No worries," Tokiwa said. "Nobody can tell you what to do, it's your choice. But I really like the way you use color. It would be a waste to view your art as just a hobby."

Itsuki suddenly felt deeply happy.

The totem pole that Tokiwa had just made for fun had been the seed of their friendship. As a student, Tokiwa sculpted with iron, aluminum and concrete, but sometimes used wood for his own enjoyment.

"I lent that to my friend to use as a table decoration," Tokiwa admitted. "I never expected anyone to actually buy it."

That was the first and last time Tokiwa would sell a wooden sculpture. It was just a fluke that he had been running the booth for his friend when Itsuki stopped by. He had never sold there on his own.

From that point on, Itsuki and Tokiwa met

several times a month. Tokiwa seemed too old to call a "friend," and Itsuki wasn't entirely sure why Tokiwa included him in his life. But he truly enjoyed the time they spent together. After two months, he found himself looking forward to his days with Tokiwa.

They visited museums, galleries, and spots that Itsuki had never heard of. Soon, Itsuki saw architecture and sculpture in a whole new way. Time passed differently when he was with Tokiwa.

Itsuki never tired of going to galleries with Tokiwa, meeting the sculptor's friends. He listened to their discussions, which were full of artistic jargon, and gradually learned to put his own impressions into words. When Itsuki tried to enter these conversations, Tokiwa just smiled.

"It's enough to just have impressions," Tokiwa said. "What really matters is finding something that has an emotional impact on you. But when it comes to technical talk, only participate if you want to. If it doesn't interest you, let it go."

Tokiwa seldom offered any commentary on art, even with pieces he'd been involved with. If Itsuki took an interest in something, Tokiwa patiently answered his questions, but never overwhelmed him with his expertise. He took the same stance with Itsuki's paintings, sharing his "personal impressions" and leaving it at that.

Tokiwa shared his own art with Itsuki many times. His works in progress were made from hard steel and concrete, but had softer lines within them. Soon, Itsuki couldn't wait to see Tokiwa's finished pieces.

When the season changed to summer, Itsuki no

longer hesitated to show his paintings to Tokiwa. They had come a long way from the original sketches.

Tokiwa's sketches, on the other hand, were different from Itsuki's. They allowed Tokiwa to grasp the form and depth of a piece, and Itsuki loved seeing them.

When Tokiwa started calling him by his first name, Itsuki hoped that maybe Tokiwa thought of him as a true friend. Tokiwa confessed as much to Itsuki that fall.

Itsuki couldn't remember the exact circumstances, but in the middle of a conversation, Tokiwa suddenly looked at him in a strange new way. Although it had happened eight years ago, the scene was still fresh in Itsuki's memory.

"I like you, Itsuki," Tokiwa suddenly confessed. "Not as a friend, but as a romantic interest. I know you'll probably refuse me, but I don't care."

Shocked by this sudden revelation, Itsuki had been unable to respond.

"Er, Tokiwa, does this mean that you, uh, like men?" Itsuki asked nervously. The words that had finally come to him were somewhat off the mark.

Tokiwa raised his eyebrows. "I guess you could say that. And when it comes to men, I do have my preferences."

Itsuki swiftly apologized, making Tokiwa laugh.

"You don't seem uncomfortable," Tokiwa observed.

"I don't mind," Itsuki replied, looking down.

"I can be surprisingly patient," Tokiwa said gently. "Don't worry about it now. But someday, I'd like to know if you'd ever be interested in me that way."

Tokiwa's mouth curled in a smile. Looking straight at Itsuki, he continued to speak frankly.

"Maybe I'm being selfish, but I like you too much to pretend we're just friends. But if you don't feel the same way, please tell me as soon as possible."

Since Tokiwa didn't pressure him for an answer, Itsuki continued to spend time with him. Tokiwa became even more affectionate, touching Itsuki's arms and shoulders in passing. Otherwise, things remained the same until early December.

At the last minute, Tokiwa had to cancel their weekend plans due to a work commitment. Their schedules had gotten out of sync, and they were only able to meet once a month now.

The master sculptor at the workshop where Tokiwa trained had been invited to create art to commemorate a new bridge. The project schedule was irregular, depending on the weather. Outsiders were forbidden at the site, so the work could only be seen from a distance. But Tokiwa invited Itsuki to visit him there, and Itsuki had happily accepted.

Itsuki loved to watch something being made, even more so if Tokiwa was involved. He took the early express train and a bus to the site.

Viewing the project from a distance, Itsuki watched as iron and cement combined into one shape. He had fun visualizing how the finished work would appear, and proudly picked out Tokiwa from among the

workers, looking as small as his little fingertip.

Tokiwa texted him around lunchtime, telling him where they could meet. He looked different in his dirty work clothes, and seemed unusually restless today.

"Meet me after work, okay?" Tokiwa asked.

"Sure."

As he watched Tokiwa return to the job site, Itsuki found himself looking forward to their evening rendezvous.

Tokiwa and the others completed the first step of the process by early afternoon. Itsuki watched as they broke down the job site over the next few hours. Once dusk began to fall, Tokiwa met Itsuki at the designated place.

"Miss me?" Tokiwa joked. "Did you draw anything while you were waiting?"

Itsuki nodded vaguely.

"Then show it to me."

"Maybe later," Itsuki stalled. It was just a drawing embellished with colored pencil. He planned to re-do it with watercolor, but Tokiwa wanted to see it now.

Whether he was looking at a little sketch or a massive sculpture, Tokiwa's expression changed dramatically where art was concerned, though his handsome features and quiet nature often made him seem unapproachable. This was even more true at a time like this, when his eyes looked sharp enough to cut you if you touched him the wrong way.

Tokiwa viewed the sketch in silence, then looked at Itsuki.

"When you make the watercolor, I'd want to see that, too," he said.

"Sure," Itsuki said hesitantly. "But I'm not sure it's good enough to take to the next level."

"Only you think that. I'm looking forward to it." Tokiwa laughed, playfully ruffling Itsuki's hair. Itsuki knew Tokiwa wasn't lying, and felt a little embarrassed.

"Shall we go home now?" Tokiwa said. "Put on your jacket so you don't catch a cold."

Tokiwa handed him a motorcycle helmet, then led Itsuki to his large motorcycle. Itsuki had ridden on it many times before, but now he hesitated.

His co-workers must come here by car; Itsuki thought. He wanted to refuse Tokiwa's offer to take him home. It was just too far out of the way. Besides, Tokiwa was probably dead-tired. He really shouldn't spoil Itsuki like this.

"I can still take a bus," Itsuki said. "I checked the train schedule."

"You're not that far out of my way. Let me give you a ride," Tokiwa insisted.

Itsuki climbed on the back seat, but didn't wrap his arms around Tokiwa's broad back.

They took a winding seaside road. By the time Tokiwa stopped at a park near Itsuki's home, the sky was completely dark.

"Thank you," Itsuki said. "That was fun."

Tokiwa smiled faintly. When Itsuki shyly looked down, Tokiwa cupped his chin in a large hand, tilted his head up, and tenderly kissed him. Itsuki instantly felt shocked and confused.

Tokiwa grabbed both of Itsuki's hands, pulled him closer, and kissed him more deeply. This brand-new sensation sent shivers down Itsuki's spine. Finally, their kiss ended, and Itsuki could breathe again.

"What—are—you—stop!" Itsuki cried out.

Tokiwa ignored him, silencing his pleas with another kiss. He traced Itsuki's lips with his warm tongue, making Itsuki's whole body tremble. As their tongues intertwined, Tokiwa softly bit him, turning kissing into a contact sport.

"Oooh...aaah..." Itsuki moaned. His voice sounded girlish to him, but the inside of his head felt hazy.

Floating through consciousness, Itsuki felt Tokiwa's strong arms holding his waist so tightly it almost hurt. Itsuki also had his first taste of tobacco. Tokiwa was looking at him so closely, he could think of nothing else.

"Itsuki," Tokiwa whispered in his ear.

Even though he'd heard that familiar voice say his name before, this time his spine tingled. Resistance forgotten, Itsuki clutched at Tokiwa's sleeves. As their lips finally broke apart, Tokiwa gently pecked the edge of Itsuki's mouth, making Itsuki return to his senses.

Now, Tokiwa seemed troubled. Itsuki felt his face burning as he looked at him.

Itsuki turned away and ran, unable to look back.

"I'll call you," Tokiwa yelled after him.

Though he could have kept on running, Itsuki stopped and looked back. Tokiwa just stood there. Itsuki

forced himself to nod.

I like you, Itsuki. Not as a friend, but as a romantic interest. I know you'll probably refuse me, but I don't care.

Suddenly, Itsuki truly understood the meaning of Tokiwa's words.

They didn't meet again until two weeks later. For 14 long days, Itsuki obsessed about what to say and how to act around Tokiwa. All he could think about was seeing him again. To his surprise, the kiss hadn't really bothered him.

Itsuki had lost his father as a young child. He and his younger sister had been raised by their widowed mother. Since high school, he'd worked part-time to help with household expenses. Itsuki had no grandparents nor anyone else who could help, so he always put his family first. As a result, he'd never been on a date, or even had a crush on a girl.

These new feelings for Tokiwa were confusing, and he needed time to figure them out. Unfortunately, he didn't get any.

Two days later, Itsuki came home to find his mother and sister cowering in fear as the telephone kept ringing. His sobbing mother kept repeating the names of some distant relatives. Itsuki quickly learned that this married couple had vanished.

After their father's accidental death, the couple had helped them out in times of need. Itsuki knew his mother depended on them, but her reaction to their disappearance seemed over the top. The reason for this was made clear by the threatening voice on the phone.



This couple had owned a factory in a small town. Once it had been prosperous, but lately, they had struggled to stay afloat. They borrowed large sums of money, yet still couldn't turn a profit. Finally, they sold the factory, and disappeared to escape their debts.

Itsuki's family had nothing to do with it, as he explained to the person on the phone.

The man responded with a bitter laugh.

"Your mother was the guarantor for their property. She has complete and total responsibility," he said grimly.

Itsuki's mother swore she didn't remember this, but the couple had actually asked Itsuki's father to serve as guarantor before he died.

The Itsuki family lived a frugal existence in a two-bedroom apartment, barely able to survive on his mother's office-worker salary and the money Itsuki brought in from his part-time job.

With no real savings, they would never be able to pay even the monthly interest payment on the debt. Itsuki dropped out of school a week later to look for a full-time job, while tripling his part-time work.

His mother found extra work, and stopped smiling altogether, or even talking, for that matter. Soon, Itsuki's mental health started to suffer as well. He got too busy to notice that his little sister was getting more depressed each passing day. They had no one to ask for money, since both sets of grandparents had passed away.

Itsuki's mother started feeling sick a few weeks later. All the stress had taken its toll on her body, and

now she stopped eating and sleeping. Soon, Itsuki completely lost all hope.

As his mother's condition worsened, she got into the habit of staying home from work to sleep. Itsuki was busy working, so he entrusted her care to his younger sister, who waited up for him every night.

"Mother is acting strangely, I think something's wrong," she would say.

"I'll talk to her tomorrow," Itsuki promised, and left it at that. Truth be told, Itsuki felt deeply resentful that he was working long hours, so his mother could stay home and sleep.

After two months, a solution presented itself. The day before Itsuki had a date to see Tokiwa, Itsuki's mother made a suicide attempt. She ran up the fire escape to the roof and jumped. His sister called an ambulance, then called Itsuki at work. When she saw Itsuki come running, the long months of tension finally snapped. She began sobbing uncontrollably, completely inconsolable.

Their mother was severely injured, requiring emergency surgery and hospitalization. The doctor advised treatment for his sister as well. She should not be left alone with their mother, and should spend time with other relatives if possible.

Itsuki was shocked to hear his mother say "I wish I had died" and "If I weren't here, life would be easier for my son."

She would burst into tears without warning, then stare at the wall and whisper to herself. His younger sister was no longer willing to enter their mother's hospital room, but Itsuki was too scared to leave her alone.

That night, as his sister fell asleep clutching his shirt, Itsuki worried about what to do. His mother's medical bills were piling up. Even if she recovered completely, she could never go back to work. From now on, the family would have to survive on Itsuki's income.

His sister had just entered a tuition-free public high school. By the time she graduated, Itsuki figured he'd have stable employment. He knew that she dreamed of college, and he wanted to make her dream come true.

The more he thought about it, the more depressed he became. Then all of a sudden, Yamabe came into his life.

Itsuki knew Yasuyuki Yamabe by name. He was a famous sculptor who taught at the workshop where Tokiwa had apprenticed. Itsuki had never met him personally, and didn't know what to make of Yamabe's surprise visit.

Tokiwa was the only link between them, but Itsuki hadn't seen him since that fateful night on the motorcycle. One date with Tokiwa was postponed because of work, then another when his mother attempted suicide. Tokiwa didn't carry his cellphone on the job, so he was hard to contact.

Itsuki never told Tokiwa about his situation at home. He just didn't feel comfortable discussing it, even with friends who already knew the situation.

"Sorry, my schedule's just too busy right now," he'd told Tokiwa.

"I understand. Call me when you see your way clear," Tokiwa replied.

His feelings for Itsuki had not changed.

But why in the world did Yamabe want to see him? The great master artist seemed to sense Itsuki's apprehension.

"I've seen you talking to Tokiwa near the job site," he explained.

Itsuki was surprised, but said nothing.

"You're looking for a job, right?" Yamabe went on. "Then why not work for me? You can be my personal assistant."

Itsuki couldn't believe his ears.

I must be dreaming, he thought. Yamabe wanted Itsuki to live and work in his home. He'd pay him an excellent salary on top of free room and board.

Yamabe also promised to transfer Itsuki's mother to a better hospital, hire a private nurse if necessary, and pay all of the medical bills. If and when Itsuki's mother was released, Yamabe would pay her expenses for as long as Itsuki worked for him. Yamabe would also send Itsuki's sister to an elite boarding school, where she would be counseled until she was ready for college.

"As for your mother's debt, I'll take care of that as well. Any other financial concerns you need help with?" Yamabe asked smoothly.

Itsuki felt a faint chill. What Yamabe was offering seemed too good to be true, there must be a catch somewhere. Itsuki knew this instinctively, despite his utter exhaustion.

Yamabe laughed at Itsuki's doubtful expression, and explained the conditions of his offer.

"You can work for me as long as you like. It

will be another six years until your sister graduates from college, so let's say six years for now. But remember this: when you live with me, you must obey me completely. I'll control every aspect of your behavior, from how you talk to what you wear, even your hairstyle."

"What's the point of all this?" Itsuki asked, confused.

"I'd like to have you around, that's all. You remind me of a girl I loved long ago. This may seem strange, but I'll stand by my agreement. A lawyer can draw up a contract if you like."

Yamabe handed his business card to the bewildered Itsuki, told him to think it over, and left.

For good or bad, Yamabe's proposal came at a perfect time. Itsuki could pay his mother's medical bills, send his sister to school, and get his family out of debt.

You can work for me as long as you like.

Never in his wildest dreams did Itsuki imagine something like this would happen. But working for Yamabe would mean sacrificing his own freedom.

Itsuki tossed and turned that night, wondering what to do. The next morning, he went to the hospital, though he knew his mother was in no condition to give advice.

Itsuki's mother opened her eyes and weakly called out to her dead husband, "Where's my baby? Where's 'baby' Itsuki?"

She had relapsed into mental illness, and the doctor didn't know if it would be temporary or long term.

That night, Itsuki called Yamabe to accept his offer.

Yamabe quickly went to work, paying off the Itsuki family's debt the very next day. The day after that, Itsuki's mother was transferred to a spacious hospital near the mountains. On the third day, Itsuki's sister was sent to boarding school. Itsuki watched as a hired car took her away, his sister staring at him mournfully from the back seat.

When Itsuki returned to his modest apartment, Yamabe was waiting for him by the battered door, clad in a dapper suit. Itsuki hurriedly invited him inside. Yamabe looked at Itsuki's meager possessions with frank curiosity, then told him to get rid of everything.

"Don't bring any personal effects with you," Yamabe ordered. "When you decide to stop working for me, I'll make sure you have everything you need. From now on, you will not be permitted to contact people without my consent. My staff will deal with your things. You must leave with me now."

Itsuki looked horrified. Just like that, he was now estranged from everyone he knew. But when he thought about it, he really didn't need to get in touch with anyone before he left. Except for one person, that is.

"I'd like to call Tokiwa to say goodbye, if that's okay with you," he said shyly.

Yamabe just snorted. "Exactly what sort of 'farewell' do you have in mind?" he sneered.

Suddenly, Itsuki truly understood the weight of his decision, and his sudden change in status.

Later that day, Yamabe brought Itsuki to his estate. His home seemed ridiculously spacious to Itsuki, who was used to living in apartments, but his host was

not only a famous sculptor, but also the son of a wealthy captain of industry.

"This all belongs to me," Yamabe told him. "The house, the workshop, the forest, all mine."

Itsuki suddenly felt a little dizzy.

His room was in the mansion's second floor, adjacent to Yamabe's private room. It held an expensive-looking bed and desk, plus a closet filled with clothes in Itsuki's size.

"If there's anything else you need, talk to my tailor," Yamabe told him. "But for now, stay in your room and do as I say."

Itsuki's skin grew cold at Yamabe's mild, yet commanding tone.

"You may visit your mother with a chaperone once a month, but you are not allowed to leave the premises for any other reason," Yamabe added.

You can work for me as long as you like.

Itsuki knew he'd be giving up his freedom when he took this job, but he never imagined he'd be treated like a piece of property.

In the following eight months, Itsuki spent all of his time in his room or Yamabe's, except for one visit per month to his mother. Yamabe's obsessive need for control drove Itsuki mad. Yamabe watched Itsuki like a hawk and pointed out all his flaws, including the way he walked, the way he talked, the way he dressed, and his table manners. Itsuki was also not allowed to cut his hair, no matter how long it grew.

"Such gorgeous hair," Yamabe commented. "It would suit your delicate bone structure to wear it longer."

Needless to say, this constant scrutiny was extremely stressful for Itsuki. When Yamabe was too busy to "mold" Itsuki, he left him books and DVDs to study. Yamabe's bedroom included a well-stocked library with a variety of titles, from popular novels to how-to books.

When Yamabe returned from his trips, he encouraged Itsuki to share his impressions of the latest book or DVD.

"I don't want a puppet who nods his head at everything I say," Yamabe once told him.

But you hold all the strings, Itsuki thought.

"I don't demand absolute obedience from you," Yamabe insisted. "Hate me to your heart's content, as long as you do what I tell you."

Yamabe looked at Itsuki with amusement and smoothly continued.

"I have a vision of who I want you to become. A balanced education is part of that. If you can't think for yourself, you'll soon bore me. Just never deceive me, or become romantically involved with anyone. Other than that, do as you like. And if you need anything, ask Kasaoka."

That's an odd thing to say, Itsuki thought. *You bought my freedom, remember?*

But then again, Itsuki had made the choice to accept the offer, to ensure his family's security.

About six months later, Itsuki noticed Yamabe looking at him with satisfaction.

Under Yamabe's direction, Itsuki had flown out of his rough cocoon with his intelligence and spirit

intact. Itsuki had become a gentleman.

I have a vision of who I want you to become.

Now, Itsuki truly understood what those words meant. Yamabe was a sculptor above everything, creating large-scale works of concrete and steel. His process was very methodical: design the work, draw up blueprints, choose the materials, mold a trial version. The final piece emerged looking exactly as he had envisioned it.

Itsuki was a human sculpture, a “work in progress” in Yamabe’s eyes. His good parts were left as is, the unnecessary bits carved away. Itsuki adjusted to fit Yamabe’s mold, and in the end, became the perfect image of his design.

Yamabe was creating a living doll. At first, he thought he might get bored with the project, but once Itsuki began to transform, Yamabe became even more enthralled. Once Itsuki’s hair grew past his shoulder blades, Yamabe treated him like a dress-up doll, picking out all of his clothes and accessories. Suits were always worn with a tie, Itsuki’s hair was always tied back in a ponytail. Itsuki felt odd dressed like this, but Yamabe was very particular.

“You can start training under Kasaoka ^{to} become my second personal assistant,” Yamabe told him one day.

Kasaoka took one look at Itsuki and rolled his eyes. “Tell me the truth. Do you want to sit around all day looking pretty? Or do you actually want to work?” he said briskly.

“I want to work,” Itsuki replied.

Itsuki felt it was his duty to try his best. Yamabe

was paying him far too much to be just a dress-up doll. Itsuki wanted to prove that he was much more capable than that.

Kasaoka seemed to relax a bit, though he still looked stern. “Okay, then, training starts today. From now on, you’ll answer to both Yamabe-sensei *and* me, but don’t expect any special treatment.”

Kasaoka meant what he said. Itsuki had little work experience, having dropped out of vocational school, but Kasaoka pointed out his every little mistake. At the end of each day, Kasaoka went over his work and often gave Itsuki books to study that night.

Itsuki was all too aware of his shortcomings. He was grateful for Kasaoka’s feedback. He tried to improve as much as he could by reading books, doing research on the Internet, or picking Kasaoka’s brain. Itsuki even stayed up late to study, though Yamabe disapproved.

“Kasaoka is my assistant. I just want you here by my side,” he complained, looking peeved.

“Sorry, but I’d like to keep learning,” Itsuki muttered.

Yamabe responded with silence.

“Spending time with you is fine with me,” Itsuki continued in a softer tone. “But I want to keep studying to be the best possible employee for you.”

Yamabe sighed. “As you wish. Just don’t let your studies come before spending time with me. I won’t tolerate that.”

Itsuki nodded.

Though Itsuki was trying to succeed on his own terms, he definitely had some problems. Kasaoka had

lived and worked with Yamabe for years, and was very skilled as a personal secretary. Itsuki could never hope to replace him, not that he even wanted to. Yamabe also treated Kasaoka like a regular employee, but regarded Itsuki as someone who needed his love and protection.

When Yamabe was in a bad mood, he just took one look at his beloved pet Itsuki, and his smile would swiftly return. He would stroke the sleeves of Itsuki's suit, playfully tug on his hair, shower him with compliments like "that color really suits you."

A few weeks after Itsuki's debut as Yamabe's second assistant, rumors started to spread that he was also Yamabe's lover. Yamabe had barely gone to his workshop for nearly six months, though he often neglected his work if he wasn't in the mood. But six months was a long time, and his absence triggered a tidal wave of gossip.

Just who was this "mystery person" who never left Yamabe's side? Then Itsuki began to appear publicly, adding fuel to the fire.

Even if Yamabe demanded sex from him, Itsuki was not really in a position to refuse. He was totally indebted to him. In fact, it seemed almost stranger that their relationship hadn't turned physical.

"Sensei, aren't you worried about your reputation?" Itsuki asked one day.

"If they want to talk, let them talk," Yamabe scoffed, running his fingers through Itsuki's black hair. "I'm quite fond of you, and have no intention of letting you go quite yet," Yamabe said firmly. "But remember, you are forbidden from having sex with anyone until you



quit this job. Got it?"

"Yes," Itsuki nodded.

Though Yamabe's staff kept gawking at him, Itsuki completely ignored them. But how would he react if he ever saw Tokiwa?

Itsuki had heard that Tokiwa finished his training and left Yamabe's workshop. He felt relieved by the news, but also a little sad.

They finally met again almost a year later. One day while Itsuki was attending an art show with Yamabe, Kasaoka sent him on an errand to a nearby department store. On his way back to the gallery, Itsuki heard someone call his name. He slowly turned around—and his heart stopped.

There was Tokiwa, looking absolutely shocked, decked out in a to-die-for suit. He was attending the same show.

When he heard Tokiwa call his name, Itsuki suddenly realized that Yamabe was now the only person who called him by his first name. The others referred to him only as "Hashimoto."

A wave of nostalgia flooded Itsuki's heart. He'd been waiting to see Tokiwa all this time. So many things to talk about, to apologize for. Itsuki didn't know where to begin.

"Hey, you," Tokiwa said, looking puzzled. "Why are you here and dressed like that?"

Itsuki suddenly returned to his senses, remembering his promise to Yamabe. Though Tokiwa was looking right through him, Itsuki found himself instinctively shrinking away. Two years before, Itsuki

had left without saying goodbye. No wonder Tokiwa was surprised to see him. They had unfinished business.

"Itsuki? What's wrong?"

Frozen like a deer in front of a car's headlights, Itsuki was suddenly rescued when Kasaoka showed up.

Itsuki tried to appear stoic, but Kasaoka seemed to sense his inner turmoil.

"This is Yamabe's new assistant," Kasaoka told Tokiwa, who looked completely baffled. "Sorry, we have to go now."

"What was that all about?" Kasaoka inquired, as he led Itsuki away.

"We used to be...friends," Itsuki said faintly. "I never got the chance to say goodbye..."

"Does Yamabe-sensei know about this?" Kasaoka asked grimly.

Itsuki nodded.

Kasaoka sighed. "How awful," he murmured. "Tokiwa was Yamabe-sensei's favorite."

Itsuki's eyes widened.

"Tokiwa is a real plain-talking guy," Kasaoka continued, "so Yamabe-sensei finds him fascinating. Sensei even asked Tokiwa to stay on as a staff member."

Yamabe must have thought he was special, Itsuki thought. He never treated his apprentices like that.

"You'll probably see Tokiwa again. Can you handle that?" Kasaoka gently asked.

Itsuki didn't answer.

"Tokiwa refused Yamabe's offer, but may still use his workshop," Kasaoka went on. "You'll probably

be seeing him around."

He gave Itsuki a sympathetic look.

"I think you know already, but Yamabe-sensei can be very possessive," he continued. "In your case, it goes beyond a normal employer-employee relationship. Seeing you with Tokiwa would make him jealous."

"I know," Itsuki answered. "It was my choice to come here, and I'll stand by it. I'll just explain my situation to Tokiwa."

But Itsuki never got the chance. Though Itsuki saw Tokiwa many times in the weeks ahead, Yamabe did everything in his power to keep them apart.

Yamabe would send Itsuki away if he and Tokiwa were found together. Sometimes, Tokiwa went after Itsuki when he got up from the table. Itsuki suffered in silence while Tokiwa begged to talk to him.

There were so many things he wanted to tell Tokiwa—his mother, their massive debt, his sudden disappearance. He also desperately wanted to apologize, but he gave Tokiwa the cold shoulder instead.

"Sorry, you need to take your business directly to Yamabe-sensei. I'm not at liberty to speak with you," Itsuki said once.

"Fine," Tokiwa said in a huff, looking at Itsuki with suspicion. "Just tell me one thing—are you still painting?"

Itsuki was too stunned to respond. He hadn't worked on a picture since that day at Tokiwa's job site. In fact, his sketchbook had been taken away with the rest of his possessions, including the precious totem pole.

Itsuki was forced to leave Tokiwa's wooden

sculpture in his apartment the night he left with Yamabe. He'd begged Yamabe to let him take it, but was denied. After they left, Yamabe's staff had taken Itsuki's things.

Was the totem pole taken to his mother at the fancy hospital? Or did they give it to his sister? Itsuki hated not knowing where it was. He looked at Tokiwa and forced himself to speak.

"I quit painting," he said. "Too many other things on my plate right now."

"And are you happy about that?"

Tokiwa's frank question stabbed Itsuki like a knife to the heart.

"I've lost the desire to make art, that's all," he lied.

Itsuki excused himself politely and walked away. Tokiwa made no move to follow him.

Yamabe knew that Itsuki and Tokiwa had spoken to each other. When he asked what they had talked about, Itsuki tried to be honest.

"Did you tell Tokiwa about our relationship? What did you want to tell him from before?" Yamabe asked insistently.

"Nothing in particular," Itsuki replied quietly.

Yamabe didn't want Itsuki to talk to anyone, including Tokiwa, so Itsuki kept quiet around strangers. At the workshop or at parties, Itsuki would smile vaguely and linger by the wall, though he knew this made people gossip about him even more. He figured it was the best thing he could do.

He was Yamabe's pet, a pet that the artist had poured money and time into perfecting, a fine work of

art that Yamabe wanted to show off. But when it came to outsiders, his attitude was "look, don't touch." A master never wants his pet to get too friendly with strangers.

Itsuki was like an ornament in a glass case, viewable only from a distance. It took Itsuki another six months to truly understand this. Tokiwa would call out to him, or make eye contact, or stare, but Itsuki forced himself not to respond.

The following year, Tokiwa left to study in Europe. Yamabe told Itsuki that Tokiwa was leaving the country to teach at a famous workshop, and wouldn't be returning.

"Is that right," Itsuki had replied dully.

That night, after saying goodnight to Yamabe and retiring to his room, Itsuki slumped against the door, slid onto the floor, and stayed there until dawn.

There were three years left on Itsuki's contract with Yamabe, three more years of bondage. Itsuki was not allowed to meet Tokiwa, call him on the phone, or even send him a letter, but he still had hope. Even if he couldn't speak to Tokiwa directly, he sometimes still sensed his presence.

I like you.

Itsuki often thought of Tokiwa's confession, that day he'd looked at him straight in the eyes. Tokiwa never really showed much emotion, but when he saw Itsuki coming, he smiled.

I should have told him how I felt, Itsuki thought. When he accepted Yamabe's proposal, he had wanted to say goodbye to Tokiwa more than anyone, but had done absolutely nothing about it.

You want to say goodbye, huh? No matter who that friend is, when you meet him, from now on you won't be able to speak to him or even contact him. How can I explain this so you'll understand?

Itsuki couldn't forget Yamabe's words.

He'd known he'd have to face Tokiwa at some point. He'd known this, but didn't know what to say to him. And what if Tokiwa treated him with scorn?

When Yamabe made his proposal, Itsuki had been struggling to survive. Coming home late at night after his part-time job, he would look with despair at the sleeping faces of his haggard mother and exhausted sister. Itsuki could have accepted the situation if it were his own personal debt. But the weight resting on Itsuki's shoulders should not have been his responsibility.

Itsuki had been forced to slave away at low-paying part-time jobs with no security. A full-time job was out of the question. Not only had he dropped out of vocational school, but he also lacked the necessary experience.

Itsuki knew he had been running out of options.

On the night of his mother's suicide attempt, he had watched his sister sleep, wondering how long he could continue, how much more he'd have to sacrifice.

He could use his mother and sister as an excuse for accepting Yamabe's offer, but the truth was, Itsuki's life was now easier, too. He no longer had to worry about repaying the vast debt, even though there was a heavy price for this security: his freedom.

Itsuki had cut Tokiwa out of his life because he was too ashamed to tell him the truth. No wonder Tokiwa

moved away, after the way Itsuki had treated him.

Just before dawn, Itsuki sadly looked out at the sky. He couldn't turn back the clock, or undo words or actions. He couldn't even blame his mother or sister anymore. Itsuki had made the decision to let go of Tokiwa all by himself.

There were good reasons for this decision, but Itsuki still couldn't bear to watch Tokiwa leave. The fact that Tokiwa hadn't even contacted him before he left hurt Itsuki on a purely selfish level.

I'm in love with him, Itsuki thought, finally understanding the feeling at the bottom of his heart. Tokiwa had been a special person to him right from the beginning. That was why he had given him the picture.

I should just give up, Itsuki thought dejectedly. Tokiwa loved the person Itsuki used to be, not the person he'd become. His passion for Itsuki had probably run dry, those strong feelings abandoned in the past.

Even if Tokiwa no longer cared for him, Itsuki wanted no ill will between them. He would let go of his unrealistic expectations, hide memories of the past where no one could see them. When Tokiwa returned home, Itsuki would meet him as Yamabe's secretary, a mature adult.

Three years later, Tokiwa returned to Japan.

From a distance, Itsuki watched Tokiwa pay his respects to Yamabe. Although Tokiwa greeted Yamabe in a polite manner, and said hello to Kasaoka, he totally ignored Itsuki. No words were exchanged between them.

Itsuki heard Yamabe's apprentices say that

Tokiwa had made a name for himself abroad, and planned to start his own workshop in Japan. While Itsuki felt happy about Tokiwa's success, he felt crushed to be completely out of the man's orbit now.

If only he could tell Tokiwa that he loved him! Then Tokiwa could reject him, and Itsuki could move on with his life. But it was too late to do anything now, no matter how strong his feelings were for Tokiwa.

Chapter 5

Itsuki awoke from a beautiful dream with a pleasantly cool sensation all over his face. It felt so good that he sighed a little, slowly opening his eyes. But, fully awake, he found that his whole body felt heavy, like it was stuck in mud, and his brain felt all fogged up. Staring at the ceiling, he tried to remember where he was.

"How are you feeling? Are you thirsty?"

Itsuki slowly turned his head and then gulped. Tokiwa sat on a pillow beside the bed, looking at Itsuki with inscrutable eyes. Itsuki bolted away from the bed, ignoring his pain in an attempt to escape, but his banged-up legs got in the way. He saw his casts and remembered why he couldn't move.

"Do you want to hurt yourself again?" Tokiwa admonished, restraining Itsuki with his broad hands.

He lifted Itsuki back onto the bed, picked up a towel from the floor, and then settled back on his pillow.

Itsuki looked down at his pajamas. They were definitely a size too big for him, but felt good against his skin.

Who do these belong to? he wondered, just as a hand reached out and stroked his face.

Itsuki jumped at Tokiwa's cool touch. Tokiwa grasped Itsuki's shoulders and brought his face close,

pressing his forehead against Itsuki's. Their lips naturally came together in a kiss.

Tokiwa gently brushed away Itsuki's loose hair, wrapping his fingers around the back of his neck. Itsuki felt a ripple go through his body as Tokiwa pulled him closer.

"You have a fever," Tokiwa said. "Get more sleep. It's still snowing outside, anyway."

As Tokiwa gently kissed his bottom lip, Itsuki heard a low roaring sound in his ears and remembered Tokiwa's words from last night.

You're just another piece of property to me.

The memory assaulted him, like cold water being poured on his head.

"When you're ready, will you go see Yamabe with me?" Itsuki asked bluntly. Tokiwa's expression suddenly darkened, but Itsuki bravely continued. "I asked you yesterday, remember? They can send a driver for us, no problem. Would you mind if I borrowed the phone again?"

Tokiwa just looked at Itsuki for a moment.

"I'm in the middle of working on a piece," he said in a huff, sounding annoyed. "I can't leave it half-finished just because you came here out of the blue."

"But—" Itsuki started to protest.

"Give me two weeks," Tokiwa interrupted. "Then I'll go."

Tokiwa was in no mood to negotiate, judging from his firm tone, so Itsuki swallowed his protests. Yamabe would just have to understand. Tokiwa couldn't drop everything to go see him. Though Tokiwa would

be Yamabe's heir, he was not a part of Yamabe's inner circle. And besides, though Yamabe was terminally ill, he was doing okay at the moment.

"All right then. I'll tell Yamabe," Itsuki said coolly, trying to act composed, but the heat of Tokiwa's body against his own felt like fire. Gritting his teeth against the pain, Itsuki tried to squirm away from Tokiwa's embrace.

"Sorry, but I have to leave today," he said.

"Just how do you intend to do that?" Tokiwa mocked. "The roads are completely frozen over, and the weatherman just forecasted another day of snow. He says it's the biggest blizzard in years."

"But—"

"Taxis can't make it up here, remember? Or do you plan to hike down the mountain on two broken legs?"

Itsuki's eyes wandered to the window. Sure enough, the landscape was pure white. He thought about the road to Tokiwa's house, bumpy and full of sharp turns. Some stretches didn't even have a guard rail, and the shoulders would be buried in snow. It would be impossible to get down by car right now, let alone on a broken leg.

"If you rush home now, you'll just get in the way," Tokiwa muttered. "Everybody knows you're just Yamabe's arm candy. They probably don't even miss you very much."

Itsuki couldn't really defend himself, but Tokiwa's put-downs still hurt him to the core.

"You're right, I guess," he admitted. "But I'm

not much use to you, either. I'll call them to pick me up."

Tokiwa may need two weeks to finish his work, but Itsuki didn't have to hang around that long. If he explained the road conditions to Kasaoka, they could send someone in a four-wheel drive.

"Isn't your job sitting around and looking pretty?" Tokiwa scoffed. "You can easily do that here. You just won't have Yamabe-sensei to fawn over you."

Itsuki was stunned, speechless.

"Or did you actually plan to interrupt my work, so I'd have to bring you back there?" Tokiwa suggested, grasping Itsuki's chin.

Itsuki still kept silent, but Tokiwa wasn't finished with him.

"I'll go see Yamabe with you two weeks from now. Until then, you'll stay here with me. I'll tell Yamabe-sensei myself," Tokiwa spat out, then he turned around and left.

Itsuki's body stiffened and he struggled to breathe.

You just won't have Yamabe-sensei to fawn over you.

Itsuki couldn't get Tokiwa's words out of his mind as he looked down at his casts. He still hurt from falling off the bed the night before, and his wrists showed faint marks from where Tokiwa had bound them together.

I can't take this anymore, Itsuki thought.

Suddenly, he felt the tension drain from his muscles. He flopped over and visualized his exhaustion

pouring out of his fingertips. Carefully arranging his legs on the bed, Itsuki propped his head on a soft pillow and laughed in spite of himself. But the sound of his own demented laughter echoed in his ears, so he bit his lip to silence himself.

Itsuki had never had sex with Yamabe, though he had stopped thinking of his body as his own. But no doubt about it, his relationship with Yamabe was definitely kinky.

I must be pretty kinky myself to put up with it.

Itsuki curled up on the bed and closed his eyes, smelling Tokiwa's favorite cigarettes on the sheets. He would never grow tired of this scent, even if being able to smell it had come about through a violent act.

Chapter 6

Tokiwa reappeared later that afternoon. He lifted Itsuki in his arms, carried him to the living room, and brought him a tray filled with food.

Itsuki had no appetite, but knew Tokiwa would make him eat something. He ate half a bowl of vegetable soup before putting his spoon down.

"You finished?" Tokiwa asked, his brows furrowing.

Itsuki nodded. Tokiwa took away the tray and brought him a hot drink.

"Thanks. Sorry to be such a pain," Itsuki said sincerely.

Tokiwa raised his eyebrows, but his expression did not change. Itsuki quietly drank his tea. As soon as he finished, Tokiwa grabbed him by the shoulders. Before Itsuki could ask questions, Tokiwa was carrying him down the hall to another room.

"Wh-where are we going?" Itsuki stuttered nervously.

"To take a bath. It's been two days, hasn't it?" Tokiwa answered.

Itsuki saw a washing machine and a sink in what appeared to be a changing room. A bathing room was behind the sliding glass door. Tokiwa set him down on a wooden chair.

"Take off your clothes," he gruffly ordered.

Is he going to watch me? Itsuki wondered.

Tokiwa huffed when Itsuki hesitated. He started unbuttoning Itsuki's pajamas with his long fingers, but Itsuki quickly pushed his hand away.

"I can do it myself," Itsuki protested. "Would you mind leaving while I undress?"

"You can't wash yourself in this condition," Tokiwa pointed out. "There's no hand rail in there."

"Well, maybe I..." Itsuki said slowly, stalling for time.

"The doctor said not to get your casts wet," Tokiwa reminded him. "Plus it's slippery in there. You could fall and hit your head. Do you want to be rushed to the emergency room in an ambulance this time?"

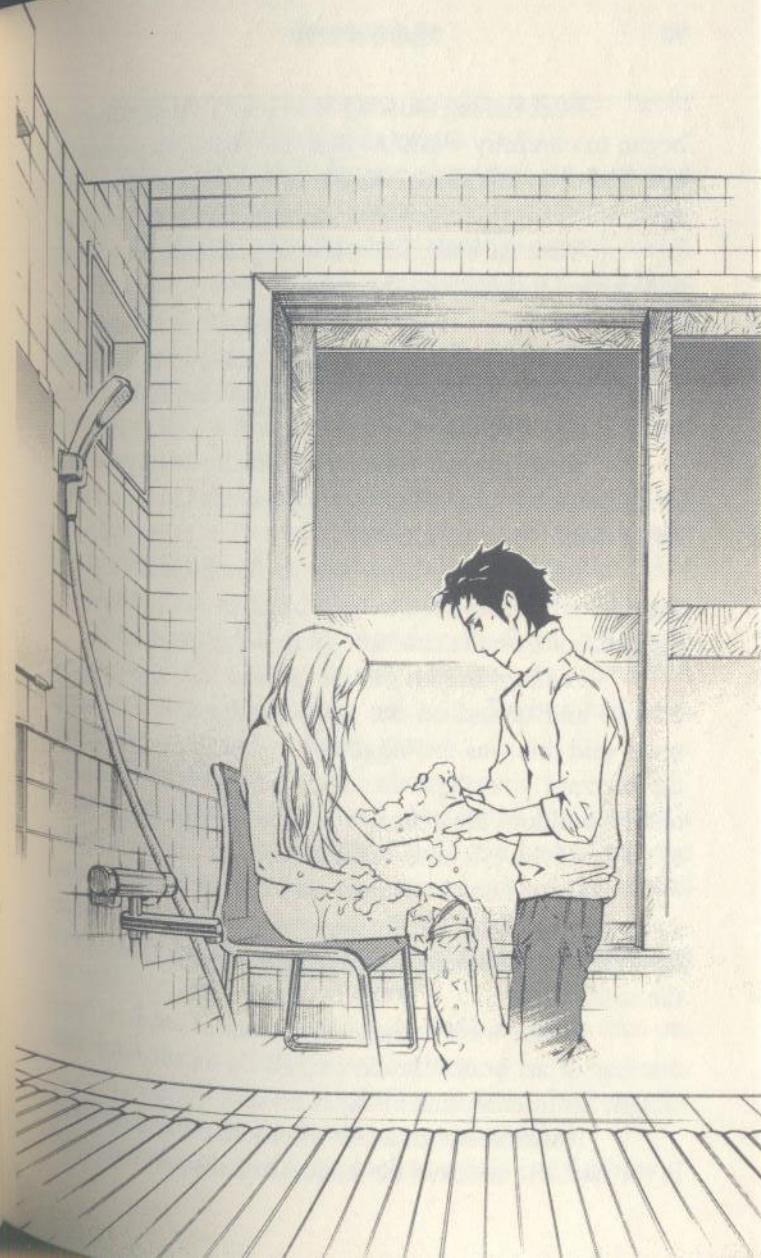
Itsuki didn't bother to reply. He had the distinct impression that Tokiwa was in no mood for back-talk.

"You have nothing to hide anyway. I saw everything last night," Tokiwa said matter-of-factly.

Itsuki stiffened as Tokiwa stripped off his clothes and wrapped his casts in plastic bags. He sat Itsuki on a plastic chair next to the tub, and then splashed warm water on his shoulders.

"Grab the arm rests. I don't want you to slip," Tokiwa said curtly, scrubbing Itsuki's arms with a soapy sponge.

Tokiwa seemed cold and indifferent again, as if last night's passion had been just a dream. There was a detached, clinical air to the hands that washed Itsuki's thighs. Tokiwa kept his gaze averted, looking so serious that Itsuki felt terribly self-conscious.



After rinsing the soap from Itsuki's body, Tokiwa began to carefully wash his hair, the first time someone else had done this since Itsuki was a child. He closed his eyes, soothed by the gentle motion of Tokiwa's hands.

After the bath, Tokiwa wrapped Itsuki in a towel and carried him back to the sofa.

"You can wear these today," Tokiwa said, handing Itsuki more clothes that reeked of tobacco, clearly his own garments. Then he left the living room while Itsuki struggled to dress himself.

Soon Tokiwa returned, carrying a tray with a small pot and a cup. He put the tray on the table and took away Itsuki's wet bath towel.

Touching his damp hair, Itsuki realized he'd lost the rubber band he used to tie it back. It was probably in the bedroom, but he couldn't go looking for it now.

Feeling bored, Itsuki picked up the remote control and turned on the large screen TV. The local news said this was the biggest snowfall in 20 years, and the blizzard warning was still in effect. Itsuki glanced out the window. He definitely had no choice. He'd have to stay at Tokiwa's house until the weather cleared up.

Later, an anime show came on. Itsuki felt bored so he turned off the TV. He was about to take a nap when he noticed some books stacked on the floor at the end of the sofa.

There were magazines, albums, and a large number of art books. Itsuki picked up an art book that caught his interest, and his eyes instantly widened.

It was about an artist whom Itsuki had admired in the past. He checked the indicia and discovered it had

been published by a museum in a distant city. Itsuki quickly lost himself inside the pages.

He had visited the same museum on a middle school field trip, and had fallen in love with the artist at first sight. Though he had already passed away, the artist had left behind a rich legacy of paintings of trees, flowers, and small birds. The delicate brush strokes and soft melding of colors had been the artist's trademark. Engrossed in the pictures, Itsuki came upon the reproduction of a painting he had seen with Tokiwa years ago.

Itsuki remembered that time vividly in his mind. He had gazed at the painting for nearly an hour, totally engrossed. Suddenly a voice had whispered to him, "Ah! So this is what you like."

Tokiwa had been standing so close, but Itsuki hadn't even noticed he was there. The entire time that Itsuki was absorbed in the painting, Tokiwa had been right there, looking at it with him.

"Thank you," Itsuki whispered.

The first time he had discovered this painter's work during his middle school field trip he had had the same obsessive reaction and almost missed the school bus as a result.

"I was looking at a picture," Itsuki had explained breathlessly, hurrying to his seat.

His classmates all laughed at him. From then on, Itsuki always went to museums alone.

When Tokiwa had first invited him to the museum, Itsuki had told him about his quirks.

"Sometimes, I can look at a painting for hours,"

he'd warned. "But I'll try to keep up with you."

But Tokiwa had never rushed him. Remembering that museum trip, Itsuki felt warm inside.

He fell asleep on the sofa, clutching the art book to his chest, not waking up until he heard someone call his name. Tokiwa was at his side again. Tokiwa took the book from his hand and lifted him from the sofa.

"Where are you taking me?" Itsuki asked.

"To the bathroom. You must need to go by now?" Tokiwa asked in a teasing voice.

Tokiwa carried him in and helped him sit down. Itsuki somehow convinced him to leave the room. Once Itsuki had finished his business, Tokiwa carried him back to the living room.

"I'll be back in two hours, but call if you need me sooner," Tokiwa instructed. "I'll stay within earshot."

"Um, what about the wheelchair?" Itsuki asked.

Yesterday, he had used the wheelchair to get around. It relieved Tokiwa of some of the burden of Itsuki's care.

Tokiwa gave Itsuki a tired look. "I took it back."

"What? But, why?" Itsuki gasped.

"The hospital needed it. When your left ankle heals, we'll get some crutches for you. Please be patient until then," Tokiwa said brusquely.

"Then maybe I should go home," Itsuki said. "I don't want to cause you any more trouble."

"And then what? Will Yamabe-sensei take care of you instead?" Tokiwa snapped.

Itsuki didn't know what to say. He was

accustomed to being treated as Yamabe's prized pet. He responded to Tokiwa's stare with a cold look. If Tokiwa needed to speculate about his strange relationship with Yamabe, Itsuki would merely respond in a clinical fashion.

All he knew was that Yamabe had never yelled at him the way Tokiwa was doing now.

"Do what you want, then! I don't care anymore! Walk down the mountain, have them pick you up, whatever!" Tokiwa yelled then stomped out of the room.

Itsuki suddenly didn't feel like asking to use the phone.

I'll go see Yamabe with you two weeks from now. Until then, you'll stay here with me.

If Tokiwa wouldn't let him in the studio, he couldn't help him with his work. Now Tokiwa had even taken away his wheelchair. Tokiwa definitely wanted to keep him here, but Itsuki didn't understand why.

Outside the window, it was still snowing hard. Itsuki stared at the outside world, feeling more frustrated with every falling snowflake.

Chapter 7

The snow kept falling that night, as the local news gave constant updates about the record-setting blizzard.

Tokiwa finally emerged from his workshop and entered the living room, where Itsuki was dozing on the couch. Itsuki felt a cold chill and woke up. Tokiwa had taken off his blanket and was now lifting him up.

Itsuki looked vacant as Tokiwa carried him into the warm bedroom. His entire body tensed as Tokiwa lowered him onto the bed. Tokiwa didn't seem to realize that Itsuki was awake, and straightened his legs for him. Then he covered Itsuki with a blanket and quietly went away.

Itsuki felt relieved when Tokiwa didn't return, but he was still a little anxious. He turned to look at the clock on the wall. It was almost 11.

Was last night just a one-time thing? Tokiwa didn't seem to care about being Yamabe's heir, but Itsuki knew that Tokiwa had never really been interested in things like that. Itsuki knew this, yet he kept pressuring Tokiwa to see Yamabe.

At any rate, Tokiwa would surely not return tonight. He had probably decided to sleep on the sofa. Itsuki felt an inexplicable sense of emptiness, but ignored the feeling and mashed his face into the pillow.

Suddenly, he heard footsteps coming down the hall, and froze under the blanket. The sound of the door opening seemed unnaturally loud. Tokiwa moved quietly, thinking Itsuki was asleep. Itsuki heard him undress, and then climb in next to him.

The longer Itsuki pretended to be asleep, the tenser his body felt. He told himself that Tokiwa was only there because there was nowhere else for him to go.

"Ahh!"

An arm reached out and pulled him close, causing Itsuki to cry out without thinking. A cold hand moved up his throat and grasped his chin. Now he could feel Tokiwa's breath on his skin. Tokiwa kissed him passionately, stealing his breath away, holding him so tight that Itsuki had no chance for escape.

Itsuki struggled to breathe as Tokiwa's tongue forced its way into his mouth, kissing him with the same intensity as the night before. Tokiwa's long arms seemed to be squeezing the breath from his body.

Tokiwa's cool fingers slipped under Itsuki's pajama top and stroked his chest and his stomach. Itsuki shivered with surprise as Tokiwa pinched his sensitive nipples. Tokiwa was definitely picking up where he had left off last night.

Tokiwa silenced Itsuki's protests with a long kiss. Then he kissed Itsuki's ears through his hair and sucked on his neck. Itsuki felt the sensation all the way down his spine. He closed his eyes and stiffened against Tokiwa.

Tokiwa's hand was moving in synch with his

lips, diving under the waistband of Itsuki's sweatpants. Last night was the first time he'd ever been touched there by another person. The sensation still startled him, but his penis automatically responded to Tokiwa's touch.

"Why...uh!"

Tokiwa didn't reply to Itsuki's gasps, preferring to suck on an earlobe and stroking Itsuki's chest with his other hand.

Tokiwa's fingers were merciless. Nibbling on Itsuki's lips, he slowly but surely brought Itsuki's arousal to its peak. Itsuki's freshly-awakened desire felt even more intense than yesterday. As Tokiwa caressed him with his lips and fingers, Itsuki couldn't hold back his cries of pleasure. He tried to wriggle his hips away, attempting to escape, but Tokiwa pulled him right back into the action. Itsuki felt the fires of passion burning brightly within as Tokiwa fondled his penis with greater intensity.

"No! Let me go!" he cried, violently shaking his head.

He tried to push Tokiwa away, but Tokiwa kissed his chin, licked his neck, and sucked on his earlobe. Before Itsuki knew it, he was going over the edge.

"Itsuki, Itsuki," Tokiwa moaned.

Itsuki felt as if his heart was being torn apart. He pressed his face into the pillow to silence his panting, so loud it hurt his ears.

He thought Tokiwa would finally release him, but Tokiwa turned Itsuki around and deeply kissed him again. Suddenly, Tokiwa placed his hands on Itsuki's legs, and Itsuki trembled in fear.

Tokiwa gently lifted Itsuki's casts like he was handling two precious objects. His hands felt cold against the back of Itsuki's knees.

This isn't over yet, Itsuki thought.

He remembered Tokiwa's brute force from last night and shivered. He opened his mouth to protest, but no words came out.

Tokiwa suddenly sunk his teeth into the soft flesh of Itsuki's inner thighs. Itsuki felt a searing pain for a moment, but it was soon replaced by the wet warmth of Tokiwa's mouth. A strange new sensation spread over Itsuki.

"Don't fight me, or I'll have to force you again. Be a good boy and keep still. I promise I won't hurt you," Tokiwa said brutally, nibbling on Itsuki's thigh. Itsuki could now feel Tokiwa's warm breath on his member, and his skin broke out in goosebumps.

He lifted himself up on his elbows to look, and gasped with shock.

"Stop! That's dirty!" he yelled.

"It's not dirty. I just washed it this afternoon," Tokiwa teased. "Don't worry, I can wash it again later."

Itsuki struggled to wrench himself free from Tokiwa's powerful, unyielding grasp, but didn't get very far. He could feel Tokiwa's hot breath, and then his tongue caressing his engorged member. As Tokiwa easily took the whole thing in his mouth, Itsuki's cock felt embraced by the deep wet heat of Tokiwa's throat.

Itsuki's whole body melted in pleasure, and he couldn't help but moan out loud. He grabbed Tokiwa's hair, trying to pull him off, but Tokiwa was

way too fast for him.

Now Tokiwa was using both his tongue and his fingers to open up Itsuki's secret hole.

Itsuki shivered at the intense sensation. Just the feeling of Tokiwa's hair brushing against his thighs was arousing. Unable to stand it any longer, Itsuki closed his eyes. A bright red glow burned behind his eyelids.

As Tokiwa stroked his penis, Itsuki heard a wet sound and knew he had climaxed again. He stared up at the blurry ceiling, panting as he remembered what Tokiwa had done to him last night.

No matter how much Itsuki protested, Tokiwa wouldn't stop. Tokiwa wouldn't let him go until Itsuki's virginal body was thoroughly ravaged.

Soon, Itsuki got too hoarse to even speak. He could see the pale light of dawn outside the window.

What did I do to make him so angry? Itsuki despaired. Why did he have to take things this far?

Itsuki had been pestering him to see Yamabe, but Tokiwa could always refuse the offer. Besides, it wasn't Itsuki's fault if Tokiwa was upset by Yamabe's proposal.

Maybe Tokiwa was angry about Itsuki's old painting. Maybe he didn't want him to see he still had it. Then again, maybe Tokiwa was pissed off because Itsuki went into his workshop.

Tokiwa lifted up Itsuki's knees, kissing him gently on his neck. He held Itsuki's hips, which still shuddered from pleasure.

"Let go. Relax. Let me take control," Tokiwa purred.

A moment later, Itsuki felt the intensity of Tokiwa's penis as he penetrated him even more deeply than last night. Itsuki couldn't make a sound, but held his breath to cope with the impact of Tokiwa's thrusts.

"Don't hold your breath. Just breathe slowly, you'll enjoy it more," Tokiwa said softly.

Itsuki nodded and deeply inhaled. Tokiwa kissed Itsuki's neck as if to console him, and also stroked his burning skin.

Tokiwa didn't wait long. Once Itsuki had relaxed a bit, he gripped Itsuki's hips and probed even deeper. As Tokiwa worked his hips, Itsuki felt an unfamiliar sensation deep inside his body.

"Itsuki..." Tokiwa moaned again.

Itsuki's entire body suddenly felt hot and prickly all over. He opened his eyes, drowning in this strange feeling. Tokiwa brought his face closer and stared at him, but Itsuki closed his eyes to block him out. Tokiwa kissed his face as Itsuki panted, struggling for breath.

Even with his eyes closed, he could feel Tokiwa staring down at him. Itsuki turned his head away, but Tokiwa pulled it back and kissed him. Itsuki moaned as Tokiwa explored his mouth with a hot tongue.

"Itsuki," Tokiwa called out, his voice filled with surprising sweetness. "You are mine."

"W-why are you doing this to me?" Itsuki stuttered desperately, knowing his question would not be answered.

Tokiwa just kept thrusting inside Itsuki with a gentle undulating motion, and Itsuki suddenly realized his feelings for Tokiwa had not faded at all.

When Tokiwa had gone abroad, Itsuki had made up his mind to forget all about him. He was convinced that Tokiwa only viewed him as a pest, and firmly vowed to leave the past behind. But despite all this, the pain in Itsuki's heart still felt as fresh and bright as the colors of a paint set.

Back when Itsuki was just "Itsuki," Tokiwa had confessed his desire for him, but Itsuki had been too terrified to reply. Tokiwa still remained by his side, however, watching over him with a bittersweet smile.

How could the same loving person now be treating him like a helpless doll?

"Itsuki..."

Tokiwa kissed Itsuki deeply, his tongue tasting of cigarettes. Itsuki's whole body dissolved in tingling pleasure. Unable to stifle his cries of pleasure, Itsuki felt a strange sense of despair.

As unpleasant as all this was, as much as he hated being touched this way, Itsuki still couldn't bring himself to push Tokiwa's hands away.

If this was what Tokiwa wanted, Itsuki would let him do it. His feelings right then were a mess of contradictions.

Itsuki's hands tingled from clutching at the sheets, and he couldn't move his body. As Tokiwa kept kissing him hungrily, Itsuki felt horribly detached, a doll unable to return his partner's embrace.

Chapter 8

By the time the last patch of snow had melted, Itsuki's left ankle was feeling much better. He could even stand on it if he held onto something. After lunch, Tokiwa appeared as usual to carry him to the bathroom. Itsuki washed his hands while propped up against the sink.

Back on the sofa, Itsuki suddenly remembered his lost car keys. He'd been at Tokiwa's house for six days now.

I'll have to explain to Yamabe-sensei.

Tokiwa had called Yamabe on the second day to tell him about Itsuki. Kasaoka called the house twice after that, and told Itsuki there was no need for updates on his condition.

"It would be rude for you to borrow his phone all the time. Just try to make the best of the situation," Kasaoka had said.

Itsuki wanted to tell Kasaoka to send a car for them, but Tokiwa always listened in while Itsuki talked on the phone. He would sit in silence, watching Itsuki like a hawk, until Itsuki would hang up in frustration.

Tokiwa came to Itsuki in the evenings. Usually, he would bring Itsuki to bed first, and then return later, entering the bed without a sound and taking Itsuki into his arms.

During the day, he treated Itsuki with indifference. But at night, Tokiwa held Itsuki so tightly he could barely breathe, crooning his name over and over. After their lovemaking, Itsuki slept like a baby in Tokiwa's arms.

In spite of all this, Tokiwa went back to acting cold again the next morning. He would wake Itsuki up, carry him to the sofa, give him food, take him to the bathroom. At night, Tokiwa bathed Itsuki first, and then washed himself. The rest of the time Tokiwa locked himself away in his workshop. During the day, Tokiwa always called Itsuki "Hashimoto."

Tokiwa's indifferent attitude, unreadable expressions, and sarcastic voice had all become familiar. The hands that cared for Itsuki were gentle, but somewhat clinical.

No doubt about it, Tokiwa was definitely two different people.

Who is this person? Itsuki would wonder when Tokiwa held him close at night. The next morning, when Tokiwa went back to his frosty self, Itsuki would remember his warm touch from the night before and sigh. This hot and cold cycle repeated itself each day.

Itsuki had no idea what Tokiwa's intentions were. He wanted to ask him, but couldn't seem to find the words, plus he wasn't sure how Tokiwa would even react. So Itsuki spent most of the day staring into space, wondering what it all meant.

Suddenly, Itsuki heard something outside. He looked out the window. A car he didn't recognize was approaching the house. The driver stopped and blew the horn.

Ituki heard Tokiwa go out the front door. For the last six days, no one had been here, probably because of the weather. Whoever the visitor was, Itsuki didn't expect to meet him. Suddenly, the living room door opened, and Tokiwa came in with a young man.

"So you want me to cut his hair?" the man said, looking at Itsuki with interest.

He seemed to be younger than Itsuki, with tousled light brown hair and childish eyes.

"But it looks so pretty like this!" he protested, stroking Itsuki's long mane. "Are you really sure you want me to chop it off?"

"Yes. Around shoulder length," Tokiwa directed, leaving the room.

"Do you want it shorter around the ears, or shall we wait to see how it looks?" the hairdresser asked briskly, draping a smock around Itsuki's neck. He took a hairbrush out of his toolbox and started stroking Itsuki's hair.

"I don't want to cut my hair! Please stop!" Itsuki pleaded.

The young man froze and instantly removed the smock.

"Sorry, but I'm not allowed to cut my hair," Itsuki apologized.

"But Toki asked me to do this. He said you were injured and couldn't come to the salon," the hairdresser said, looking troubled. Suddenly he brightened up, as if he finally understood. "Oh! He probably didn't tell you that I'm a licensed hairdresser! I work at the salon near the station. Here's my business card," he said in a rush.

Itsuki had never heard of the salon.

"Today is actually my day off, I really shouldn't even be here. Don't rat me out to the salon, okay?" the man said in a joking tone.

He had come all this way, and now Itsuki was sending him away. Itsuki felt bad, but what could he do? Yamabe would be livid if he cut his hair.

"I'm truly sorry, but cutting my hair is not my decision," Itsuki said, pulling it back into a ponytail again.

"If growing it out wasn't your choice, then why not cut it off?" someone snapped from the background.

Itsuki's heart nearly stopped. He didn't need to see Tokiwa's face to know that he was in a bad mood.

"Next time you bring me all the way up here, make sure the person really wants a haircut. Okay, Toki?" the young man huffed, packing away his tools. "But you can make it up to me. How about a tour of your workshop and some coffee?"

"I'll give you coffee, but the workshop is off-limits," Tokiwa said.

"Well, aren't we the big cheese? I just wanted to— Hey, put those down!" the young man yelled.

Itsuki felt someone lifting up his ponytail, and then heard the scraping sound of scissors.

"Toki! What on earth are you doing?" the hairdresser gasped.

"Just helping out," Tokiwa snapped. "You can clean it up after I'm done."

"It must have taken him years to grow all that hair!" the young man protested. "What gives you the



right to chop it off?"

"I have as much a right as he does!" Tokiwa barked. He threw down the scissors and stormed away.

Itsuki touched the rough ends of his hair. Tokiwa had cut off his ponytail in one big chunk, and his hair lay scattered on the floor. He looked at himself in the mirror.

Who am I now?

It felt strange not to feel the weight of his hair against his back. Itsuki's waist-length hair was not the only thing Yamabe liked about him, but he had loved running his fingers through it. Itsuki dreaded going back to Yamabe's looking like this. He would just have to apologize to Yamabe, tell him that it had been cut against his will.

"Shall we just trim the ends for now?" the hairdresser asked, looking at Itsuki with pity. "You can't go out looking like this."

"Please do," Itsuki said, nodding.

The hairdresser smiled with relief, and began working like a seasoned professional. He was chatty, like most members of his profession, not seeming to care that Itsuki was unresponsive. As he babbled on, Itsuki learned how he had met Tokiwa.

The hairdresser's brother-in-law was Tokiwa's high school friend. He had often met Tokiwa when he visited his sister's home.

"But he's so cold!" the young man complained. "Almost two months passed before I talked to him directly. Every year, the students at my niece's kindergarten work on an art project with their parents to

donate to the school. We started talking while working on the project."

The school always hired an established artist to oversee the process. This year it was Tokiwa. The parents and children were mostly involved with the planning. Many parents had volunteered their time, so the project was fairly large-scale.

"Toki mostly supervises the parents, who seem to be having a lot of fun with it," the hairdresser explained. "But he always seems kind of stuck-up, don't you think? Was he always that way?"

The hairdresser giggled at Itsuki and continued his story.

"Most of the dads haven't done arts and crafts since junior high! They constantly slice their fingers with the carving knives, but nobody complains. Toki must get a kick out of watching them."

Nodding vaguely, Itsuki thought the whole thing sounded strange, but he knew Tokiwa would try anything that caught his fancy. But working with kindergarteners? Truly weird. Was that the best thing he could do with his time? Just then, the hairdresser finished.

"There you go," he said, handing Itsuki a mirror. "Does it look okay in the back?"

Tokiwa had said "shoulder length" and the hairdresser followed the directions to the letter. The cut reminded Itsuki of what his hair used to look like, before he met Yamabe. He had the strange feeling of looking at a younger version of himself.

"With your jaw and neckline, your hair looks better short like this. You look more like a real person

now," the hairdresser said frankly. "Before, you resembled an inanimate object, like a potted plant or something."

"A potted plant?!" Itsuki choked.

"Yeah, you know, just sitting there. I wasn't sure if you were alive or dead. To tell you the truth, I wondered if you were a mannequin or something," the hairdresser said earnestly.

Itsuki wasn't sure of what to say.

"Oh! Sorry to be so rude!" the young man suddenly apologized, noticing Itsuki's discomfort. "I didn't mean it like that! My boss always gets on my case about stuff like this, but I wasn't trying to be mean! Really!"

As the man desperately tried to save himself, Itsuki couldn't help but smile a little. Maybe some people wouldn't care for the man's frankness, but Itsuki actually felt a little jealous of him.

"Thank you for the haircut," Itsuki said. "It looks just like it did back in the old days. Brings back memories."

"Really? Glad to hear it," the hairdresser said with relief. "Who knows, maybe I'm just not all that creative..."

Now the hairdresser seemed a little uncomfortable. Itsuki was a stranger to him, after all.

"You can shoot off your mouth like that because you're independent," Tokiwa said from the background.

"I work hard to be independent, so don't give me a hard time! I climbed a mountain for you, remember?" the hairdresser hissed.

"You've begged to come here a million times," Tokiwa retorted. "Anyway, I'm paying you, so don't complain."

"Wow, big man!" the young man said sarcastically. "Is this my coffee? Yay, thanks! But I take cream and sugar, okay?"

"Be patient, I'll bring it," Tokiwa replied, rolling his eyes.

The hairdresser turned to Itsuki and giggled.

"Toki makes great coffee, you know!" The young man's simple joy suddenly made Itsuki feel bitter.

"How much do I owe you?" he asked.

"Don't worry about it," the young man said. "I'll collect payment from the man who attacked you earlier."

"But I got the haircut," Itsuki protested. "Tokiwa shouldn't pay for it."

The hairdresser blinked at Itsuki in disbelief.

"Well? How much do I owe you?" Itsuki persisted.

"You're a strange one. Are you *really* Toki's friend?" the hairdresser asked.

Itsuki kept quiet. The hairdresser gave him a strange look and then continued.

"You didn't even get mad when he chopped your hair off, though you begged me not to cut it. Now you want to pay me. Does Toki have some weird kind of hold on you?"

"Shut up, scissors boy. Have some respect for the private lives of strangers," Tokiwa said, coming back

into the room.

"Don't call me that! It sounds like the title of some B-grade horror movie!" the hairdresser shot back, glaring at Tokiwa.

"Shut up, or I'll have to throw you out. Sit down and drink your coffee," Tokiwa said curtly, but with a touch of humor.

He set three cups of coffee on the table. All of a sudden, Itsuki felt out of place.

"I was only talking about the fee. This guy wants to pay for the haircut himself. What should I do?" the hairdresser whined, grabbing a cup.

"If you collect two fees, I'll tell your boss," Tokiwa threatened.

"If that was my plan, I wouldn't tell you, would I?" the hairdresser said, bristling. "I came here by your request, and finally got a chance to tour the house. Let me see the workshop and I won't charge for the haircut!"

"I don't let anybody see it, so stop asking," Tokiwa said firmly.

"Pfft! You're soooo uptight," the hairdresser pouted.

Tokiwa smiled at him again, like he used to smile at Itsuki back when they were friends.

Tokiwa never smiled at him that way now.

Sitting on the sofa, Itsuki felt awkward and wished he could disappear. Was this hairdresser really Tokiwa's friend? Did Tokiwa have any other lovers?

Before, Tokiwa's private life had always been shrouded in mystery. The young sculptors gossiped about everybody, but had only one thing to say about

Tokiwa—he's a workaholic.

From the beginning, Tokiwa had made a point of not talking about his private life, but nobody assumed he didn't have lovers just because he didn't talk about it.

The smock around Itsuki's neck suddenly felt unbearably heavy. He removed it carefully, taking care not to scatter the loose bits of hair. All the while, Tokiwa and the hairdresser continued their conversation.

"Tomorrow's your last day on the project, right? Wanna come to my place for lunch? I can make fried rice and soup!" the young man suggested.

"Pay attention, scissors boy," Tokiwa scoffed goodnaturedly. "They're giving us lunch boxes tomorrow, remember? But I'd pass on your cooking anyway, I can't afford to get food poisoning!"

"Meanie! Nobody gets food poisoning in the winter!" the hairdresser teased back.

Itsuki had never acted this casually with Tokiwa, not even in the past.

"Oh! Is he coming with you tomorrow?" the hairdresser asked, pointing to Itsuki.

Itsuki's ears perked up. He saw the hairdresser gawking at him.

"He has no idea what we're talking about, does he? But is he coming? I don't know what he could help you with, but..." The hairdresser meant no ill will, he was simply being honest.

Tokiwa raised his eyebrows and pretended to punch him with his fist.

"Ow, he punched me! I'll report you to the police for attacking me!" the hairdresser shrieked.

"How many times do I have to tell you to think before you speak? Will you ever get it?" Tokiwa growled.

"Aw, c'mon!" the young man protested. "He can walk a little, can't he? So he could ride in your car!"

"What are you talking about?" Tokiwa asked warily.

"Well, there's no wheelchair," the young man replied. "At any rate, all that's left is manual labor. There wouldn't be anything for him to do anyway."

Itsuki had no desire to respond, but was getting interested in this project they kept talking about.

"All I was saying was perhaps you should choose your words more carefully before speaking," Tokiwa said.

"Hey, wait a minute! Don't pull me like that!" the hairdresser suddenly protested. Tokiwa had grabbed his shoulders and was dragging him out of the living room.

"What are you doing?!" the young man yelled.

Itsuki heard muffled voices from the hallway. Tokiwa returned 20 minutes later. He looked at Itsuki's untouched coffee and frowned.

"Don't want any?" he asked.

Itsuki shook his head. Tokiwa put the cups on the tray and left the living room. Itsuki thought of the young man again.

Are you really Toki's friend?

Itsuki had been unable to answer this question, which made him question his role in Tokiwa's life yet again.

During the day, Tokiwa looked at Itsuki coldly, without a glimmer of interest. During the night, Tokiwa was kind, but never let Itsuki talk about what was happening between them.

Ultimately, Tokiwa seemed to see him as nothing more than property on loan from Yamabe. The door opened again, but it was just Tokiwa. He abruptly lifted Itsuki saying, "You probably want to wash your hair."

Tokiwa took him to the changing room, undressed him, and covered his casts with plastic bags. He sat Itsuki on the chair in the bathroom and rinsed his newly-cut hair. Itsuki noticed that there was something different about Tokiwa when he carried him back to the sofa.

Usually, Tokiwa would hand Itsuki fresh clothes and then leave. This time, he sat down next to him. Before Itsuki could say anything, Tokiwa began drying his hair with great care. Itsuki peered between the spaces in the towel and met Tokiwa's gaze.

Tokiwa instantly stopped and let the towel drop. He combed his fingers through Itsuki's hair, stroking his temples and forehead. He touched Itsuki's ears, the nape of his neck, and then his temples again. Tokiwa seemed like a child filled with wonder at the sight of some unusual thing.

"Itsuki," Tokiwa whispered.

Tokiwa never called Itsuki by his first name during the day. The intimacy of his voice sent shivers down Itsuki's spine. Tokiwa caressed Itsuki's cheek.

Itsuki was unable to respond, but for some

reason, he didn't feel the urge to flee.

Tokiwa moved closer and kissed Itsuki's eyelids, his temples, his cheeks, and the bridge of his nose. He gently bit Itsuki's chin, then covered Itsuki's mouth with his own.

This was the first time Tokiwa had kissed him so gently. Tokiwa sought to explore the inside of Itsuki's mouth. As Tokiwa slipped in his tongue, Itsuki's whole body tingled, feeling the familiar warmth and taste of tobacco.

Right now, Tokiwa's fingers were as warm as his own skin, fresh from the bath. Before, Tokiwa's hands had always seemed cold. The bath water must have warmed Tokiwa's hands, but the unexpected sensation was disconcerting for Itsuki.

After a long kiss, Itsuki flinched as Tokiwa licked the corner of his eyes. Tokiwa pulled Itsuki's head close to his chest, gently caressing his body. Itsuki could have easily escaped, but it didn't even occur to him.

Tokiwa was silent. He lay down on the sofa with Itsuki snuggled against him, and stroked his short hair. Itsuki smelled tobacco on Tokiwa's sweater, just like on the bed sheets.



Chapter 9

The next day, the sky was clear and beautiful, without a single cloud. They had breakfast earlier than usual, then Tokiwa carried Itsuki to the car. Tokiwa had given him a long-sleeved shirt and a well-worn pair of coveralls to wear. Itsuki realized that Tokiwa must have a reason for dressing him like this.

"Are we going somewhere?" Itsuki asked excitedly.

"We're going to paint something. It's the perfect job for you," Tokiwa said mysteriously.

Itsuki looked confused. Tokiwa smirked at him, reaching across the seat to play with Itsuki's hair. Tokiwa's attitude seemed to have changed overnight. Itsuki thought about the long, gentle kiss they shared after his bath. Tokiwa touched him differently now. He almost seemed to be checking to see if the Itsuki he'd once known was still there.

Things had been different last night, too. Tokiwa had held Itsuki and kissed his hair, but attempted nothing more. Itsuki had expected him to want sex, but Tokiwa just told him to go to sleep. Itsuki fell asleep in Tokiwa's arms, baffled by this sudden change.

Tokiwa seemed to be in an unusually good mood that morning as they drove down the mountain. Itsuki gasped in awe when he saw the scenery before

them—houses on a white beach, a deep blue ocean, a bright blue sky. The rich colors completely dazzled him. On his first time up the mountain, the spectacular view had been obscured by snow.

They drove into a residential area bordered by greenery, where the blue sea peeked in between the houses. The colors looked stunning to Itsuki, after years of living in a place with no ocean and few trees. They travelled down a seaside road for a while before Tokiwa stopped the car.

Itsuki saw a small building, a playground, and a colorful sign near a parking lot.

This must be the kindergarten school, he thought. Tokiwa had been working on a project to commemorate the young students who were about to graduate. Today was the last day, so there were lots to do. Itsuki wondered how he could help in his condition.

"Uh, guess I'll just stay here in the car," he mumbled.

Tokiwa frowned at him.

"I'll just get in your way," Itsuki protested. "Please go without me, sensei."

"Don't be stupid," Tokiwa replied, getting out of the car. "I want you to help with painting. And don't call me sensei, okay?"

He unloaded a wheelchair and told Itsuki to sit down.

Did he borrow this from somebody? Itsuki wondered. Then he saw a familiar name on the side of the chair. So Tokiwa had never taken it back to the hospital. He must have wanted to carry Itsuki around. At

least Tokiwa didn't try to do it in public.

"What kind of paint are we using?" Itsuki asked with interest.

"It's water-based, so it should be easy to work with. I want you to show the children how to paint, okay? They should all be ready by now. Let's wait for them here."

Tokiwa pushed Itsuki's wheelchair under the eaves of the building, and introduced him to a woman in an apron.

"Welcome, Hashimoto. Thank you for helping today," she said, nodding at Itsuki.

Sakamoto-san was the principal, a fifty-something woman with a gentle smile.

"Nice to meet you," Itsuki replied automatically.

As they chatted together for a while, some parents spread out a blue vinyl tarp and set out brushes and cans of paint. Other parents unloaded four long wooden objects from a truck.

"We're making totem poles," the principal told Itsuki. "The children will decorate it with paint, and then we'll erect them in the playground later today."

"I see," Itsuki replied, looking at the work area.

The totem poles were at least nine feet tall and nearly a foot in diameter. Human faces had been carved into each one.

"Nice, huh?" the principal said proudly. "The children drew the faces first, then they were traced onto the poles and carved by the parents."

The totem poles were placed atop some tables

in the middle of the tarp. Tokiwa carefully examined each carved face, making sure everything was perfect. A parent stood at the ready with a sheet of sandpaper, following Tokiwa's instructions.

"Hey, there! Glad you could come!" someone called out.

Itsuki turned to see the young hairdresser, who was wiping the sweat from his face with his sleeve.

"I knew it! You look soooo much better with short hair!" he babbled. "Well, of course it didn't hurt that you had the best hairdresser in town!"

"Yes, thank you," Itsuki said, feeling embarrassed.

"Glad you like it. I was so happy when Tokiwa told me he liked it, too."

The hairdresser playfully ruffled his hair. Itsuki smiled weakly, finding it impossible to dislike him.

"Sorry about yesterday," the young man went on. "I didn't mean to be a jerk, I just figured you couldn't help us here today. Please don't hate me!"

"No, no, don't worry about it," Itsuki assured him. "I'm wondering the same thing myself."

"Really? Why are you here then?" the hairdresser chattered on. "Sorry, I'm being rude again! Don't listen to me!"

Suddenly someone called his name, and he ran off looking relieved. Most of the students had arrived with their parents, and were hanging out on the playground, chatting and laughing with each other. Itsuki thought about what the hairdresser had said.

Why are you here then?

Itsvki wanted to know the answer to that question as well. Why did Tokiwa want him by his side? Why did he touch him that way? Itsuki needed to know what Tokiwa was really thinking and feeling.

Soon it was time to start painting. The principal introduced Itsuki to the children.

"Just let me know if you need some help," Itsuki said shyly, as the children just stared at him.

But soon they took him up on his offer.

"Should I use this color?" a little girl asked.

"How should I paint the hair?" a boy worried.

"This brush is giving me trouble," someone else whined.

Itsuki helped them as best as he could, getting spattered with paint in the process. No wonder Tokiwa had given him the coveralls.

It had been years since Itsuki had been with children. He felt a little bewildered, but it was fun watching them work, and he began smiling in spite of himself.

There were four totem poles, but each child had a relatively small area to paint. Before long, each pole was ablaze with vibrant colors. With the work finally finished, everybody stopped for lunch.

A teacher brought Itsuki a lunch box and a cup of tea. Itsuki looked around, wondering what to do.

"Hey, come here! No fun eating by yourself, come eat with me!" the hairdresser called out to him.

Before Itsuki could protest, the young man pushed his wheelchair to the edge of the garden, where a little girl was eating with her parents.

"Hey, big sister, big brother! This is who I was telling you about, Toki's notorious friend," the hairdresser said boisterously. "Toki took off somewhere, so he was eating lunch all by himself. Anyway, I'm gonna grab some grub before they run out!"

He ran off, leaving Itsuki behind. Itsuki suddenly remembered that this brother-in-law had been Tokiwa's childhood friend, but they had never been introduced.

"You're Hashimoto, right? Hashimoto Itsuki?" the man asked politely.

Itsuki nodded. Earlier that morning, he heard Tokiwa call him "Aota."

"I knew it. So you two finally had a chance to see each other. Glad to hear that," Aota said sincerely.

"Pardon me?" Itsuki asked.

"Tokiwa has been looking for you for a long time," Aota revealed.

Aota's words made Itsuki shiver. Just then, he heard a chipper voice nearby.

"Sorry to make you wait! Look who I found!" the hairdresser bubbled. He was carrying enough bento for five people, followed by Tokiwa, who was looking exasperated.

"You can't just kidnap people like this," Tokiwa snapped. "Didn't you hold somebody captive before?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I didn't do anything!" the young man said.

"Well, I didn't come here freely. Oh, sorry, Aota, didn't see you there," Tokiwa mumbled, grabbing the handles of Itsuki's wheelchair.

Looking a bit bewildered, the hairdresser placed

a bento box on Itsuki's lap. Now he had two of them.

"I'm taking him somewhere shady," Tokiwa said. "He's still recovering from his illness."

"That's fine, but why didn't you introduce me to Itsuki?" Aota scolded.

"If you know him already, why do you need an introduction?" Tokiwa replied smoothly. "Anyway, we can talk more later."

The hairdresser nodded toward a group of families. "Let's go over there?" he suggested to his family. "More people."

"See you later," Tokiwa said casually. He wheeled Itsuki back under the eaves of the building.

"I don't mind being by myself, really," Itsuki said. "Go hang out with your friends, Tokiwa-sensei."

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to be. You worry too much. And don't call me sensei!" Tokiwa scolded playfully.

The entrance to the schoolhouse had a concrete floor, with a tiny staircase for the children. Tokiwa parked Itsuki's wheelchair at the foot of the stairs and sat on the floor to eat.

"Are you cold?" Tokiwa asked. Itsuki shook his head. "Then hurry and eat your lunch. It's almost time to get back to work."

Itsuki felt relieved that he didn't have to eat lunch with strangers. He spread out his lunch and reflected back on Aota's words.

*You finally had a chance to see each other.
Tokiwa has been looking for you for a long time.*

Itsuki glanced at Tokiwa, who was tying a navy blue bandanna around his head. The towel around his neck was the same dark blue color. Tokiwa used it to wipe the sweat from his face as he worked. It was a mannerism Itsuki recognized from watching Tokiwa in the past.

Tokiwa polished off his lunch and lit a cigarette. Suddenly, he stared at Itsuki. Itsuki froze, unable to look away.

"Um," Itsuki stammered. "Will water-based paint really work for this project? Won't the totem poles be outside?"

"This water-based paint is actually weather-proof," Tokiwa assured him. "Why don't you try experimenting with it? You could paint my barn, I wouldn't mind."

"But it's so big! What if I messed it up?" Itsuki worried.

"I'll buy the paint for you and help prepare the surface," Tokiwa suggested.

Itsuki wasn't sure how to respond to Tokiwa's kind offer. Luckily, it was time to go back to work.

Tokiwa stood up, taking his empty bento box with him.

"Go ahead and finish your lunch," he told Itsuki before walking away.

Itsuki picked up his chopsticks, but the food now seemed less appetizing.

"Hey, mister, does your leg hurt?" a little voice called out.

Itsuki saw a little girl whose face seemed

familiar. Her head was tilted to one side as she stared at Itsuki's legs.

During the painting, she had worked calmly in the midst of chaos. Many of the children had just slopped around, getting paint all over their clothes, but she painted her little section with a quiet patience. Then, when she had almost finished, she paused.

"What's wrong?" Itsuki had asked her.

"I don't know what color to use now," she explained. "Mommy and Daddy said to choose whatever I like, but the colors I like are different from everybody else's."

"I think you should do what your Mommy and Daddy said," Itsuki replied with a smile. "It's your painting, after all. Heck, I once made a picture with a purple ocean and a yellow sky."

Her pigtails and serious manner reminded Itsuki of his little sister. When she was in kindergarten, their mother had taken them to the sea for a picnic. Itsuki had just started painting with watercolors.

While his mother and sister frolicked in the sand, Itsuki painted the scene. His sister loved the picture of the ocean painted pale purple.

"It's the color of an ocean sunset," his mother had said happily.

The little girl squatted next to Itsuki's wheelchair and looked up at him.

"Did you hurt both of your legs? Do they hurt a lot?" she asked again.

"Yes." Itsuki nodded. "I had a little accident. My legs still haven't completely healed."

"Hope you get better soon," she said innocently, gently petting his cast with her tiny hand.

Itsuki was at a loss for words.

She continued petting his cast, then looked up at Itsuki with a serious face. "It's good to put your hands on it."

"Your hands?" Itsuki echoed.

"Mommy says it will heal faster that way," the little girl said with conviction.

Itsuki nodded. The little girl held her hand against the cast as if to warm it. A few minutes later, she took her hand away.

"Thank you. It hurt before, but it feels better now," Itsuki told her.

She responded with a happy smile. Just then, her parents called her. She went running back into the yard and jumped into her father's arms, squealing with giggles. The scene made Itsuki feel nostalgic for his own childhood, and he wished he could paint a picture of them. It had been so long since he'd had the urge to paint.

Since he'd been with Yamabe, Itsuki had not painted a single picture. Yamabe would have given him art supplies, but Itsuki just never felt like painting there.

He looked over and saw that the parents had started to erect the totem poles. The bases used to support them had already been installed. The poles would be inserted into them, and then held erect as cement was poured into each foundation.

As the adults busied themselves with this process, the children drew pictures to pass the time.

Itsuki watched them from his wheelchair, feeling bored.

"Why are you being such a wallflower, Hashimoto?"

Startled, Itsuki's eyes met those of Tokiwa's friend Aota. He had come to the building to fetch something, and cement was smudged on his cheek and his shirt.

"You came here to help, so you might as well see it up close. Aren't you bored here by yourself?" Aota asked.

"I don't want to get in Tokiwa-sensei's way," Itsuki replied.

"Relax. If you were in the way, Tokiwa would be the first to let you know. Besides, Tokiwa is able to work with lots of distraction." Aota grinned, pointing to the noisy children.

Itsuki laughed.

"Anyway, he always says it's better to get in there and touch something with your own hands," Aota said.

"Hands-on experience, you mean?" Itsuki asked.

Aota nodded. "Yes. If you just look at something, you can't tell if it's hot or cold, hard or soft. That's what Tokiwa always says."

Aota hunched his shoulders while looking at the blinking Itsuki.

"For example, tofu is soft," Aota continued. "If you touch it the wrong way, it will crumble. But no matter how many times somebody explains this to you, it's impossible to comprehend. You've got to get your

hands on a whole block, make miso soup! You can't really understand something you've never experienced first hand."

"Is that so," Itsuki murmured, wondering what Aota thought of him.

"You may be injured, but your sense of touch is still fine," Aota assured him. "You can't understand something just by looking and listening. The principal of this school shares this philosophy, thank goodness."

After that long speech, Aota abruptly changed the subject saying, "I forgot to ask you before, but did you get a chance to look at that picture book?"

"Um, what picture book?" Itsuki asked.

"You mean he never gave it to you?" Aota said incredulously. "Tokiwa asked me to buy it for him. He said it was your favorite artist. That was six years ago, before I got married."

Itsuki's eyes widened when Aota mentioned the artist's name. He was Itsuki's favorite artist. Aota was talking about the book Tokiwa had carelessly left near the sofa.

"I did get to see that book. Thank you for your trouble," Itsuki said.

Aota beamed. "Thank Tokiwa, not me. When he found out I would be near the museum, he begged me to buy that book. He even took me out for drinks as a reward. It's not like him to ask for favors like that. Later I heard that he had lost touch with you."

Aota smiled again, and then excused himself to return to work. Itsuki couldn't get Aota's words out of his mind. Tokiwa had bought the book especially for him.

Many years ago, that artist had published a volume of his paintings, but by the time Itsuki had gone looking for it, the book had long been out of print. The book at Tokiwa's house was different, but still a wonderful collection, and Itsuki was touched by Tokiwa's thoughtfulness.

Itsuki remembered telling Tokiwa about his endless trips to used bookstores, searching for books about his favorite artist. He was amazed that Tokiwa had even remembered that conversation.

Six years ago. That would have been two years after Itsuki had cut Tokiwa out of his life.

Now Itsuki's life was devoted to pleasing Yamabe. He suddenly realized he had abandoned the very thing he cared for the most.

You need to get in there and touch something with your own hands...

Itsuki reflected on Tokiwa's philosophy. For a long time, Itsuki had neither touched nor been touched by anyone. This had not been the case when he lived with his family. He would roughhouse with his friends and play with his sister. After he met Tokiwa, he felt so many different things. Back then, it was normal to touch things.

But after Itsuki left his family's home, Yamabe was the only person he ever touched. When Yamabe touched him, it was only to play with his hair.

Then, a few nights ago, Tokiwa had grasped Itsuki's arms. Itsuki felt goosebumps the first time Tokiwa had touched him that way. He was unaccustomed to feeling another person's warmth, and his exposed skin

had felt a riot of sensations.

Itsuki had completely forgotten how it felt to be touched. He thought of this when the little girl stroked his cast, almost feeling her gentleness through the thick plaster. Even that limited contact had been completely foreign to Itsuki over the past eight years.

He always felt like a doll with Yamabe. Not a doll to be loved and held, but a doll to be kept in a glass case. A doll to be looked at through glass, never removed, never touched.

Itsuki had resigned himself to life inside that glass case, and no longer hoped another person might touch him.

"Hey, mister, let's draw a picture."

The little girl from before tugged on his sleeve. Itsuki looked over. She was holding a tiny easel. She set down her crayon box and then sat down next to it.

"Don't you want to see them set up the totem poles?" Itsuki asked her.

"Nah! I want to draw a picture with you," she said. "You can use my crayons."

She drew a line on her paper with her pink crayon. Itsuki thought of Tokiwa's words.

Have you made any pictures lately?

That was the first thing Tokiwa had asked him at Yamabe's place. When Itsuki told him he'd quit making art, Tokiwa had looked grim. Itsuki felt ashamed to even think of that now.

Itsuki drew because he liked to draw. He had no desire to show his drawings to others, he simply drew for the fun of it.

All this changed when he moved into Yamabe's place.

For a long time, he didn't draw anything.

There's nothing here I want to draw, he told himself.

Or had he just stopped looking around him?

"What are you going to draw?" the little girl asked.

So many times, Tokiwa had asked the same question. Itsuki thought about the scene with the girl and her father, and felt the unmistakable urge to draw for the first time in years. That precious feeling pouring from his heart was as strong now as it had been then.

"I think I know," he said slowly.

"Here," the little girl said, handing him a navy blue crayon, the same color as Tokiwa's bandanna.

Itsuki let the crayon glide across the white paper. The bold arc of color looked dazzling to Itsuki's eyes.

The next day, Itsuki held a paintbrush for the first time in years. Sitting in a corner of Tokiwa's workshop, Itsuki applied color to a rough sketch. Suddenly, Tokiwa got up from his drawing table and started searching for something on a shelf. He took down a thick book and cracked it open. Itsuki could tell by Tokiwa's clothing—jeans and a sweater—that his work was still in the planning stage.

Tokiwa's workshop was nothing like Yamabe's, which was well-equipped with large-scale machinery. Yamabe's apprentices earned their keep by working

there. Tokiwa's studio, on the other hand, was quite modest. He simply couldn't afford the fancy stuff, or even an assistant.

During the planning stage, he only needed a desk and some paper. Tokiwa kept the bare minimum of equipment on hand, renting anything else he might need. To tell the truth, Tokiwa seemed to have no desire to inherit Yamabe's workshop.

Itsuki looked relaxed as he worked. After that day at the kindergarten school, Tokiwa no longer carried Itsuki to the sofa, but brought him into the workshop instead. The first time, Tokiwa bundled Itsuki in a long coat, wrapped his legs in a blanket, and sat him down on a chair in front of a table.

Itsuki had always enjoyed watching people make things. It was even more enjoyable to watch Tokiwa, but he was careful to stay out of his way.

He had only seen Tokiwa's studio once before, now he could look at everything: the preliminary sketches on the walls, model pieces and wooden carvings that Tokiwa had made for fun. Tokiwa smiled as he noticed Itsuki craning his neck to look around, and moved his chair to accommodate him.

Itsuki had spent most of the morning looking at one shelf in particular. The time passed quickly as he touched the things he could reach, comparing finished pieces he'd seen in real life to the prototypes he held in his hands.

They moved to the living room for lunch, and afterwards, Itsuki was returned to the workshop, where Tokiwa gave him a sketchbook and a set of

watercolors with a muttered instruction of, "Play with these if you get bored."

Itsuki was unable to respond right away, and Tokiwa raised his eyebrows.

"I saw your fingers twitching this morning," Tokiwa remarked.

The fact that Tokiwa had noticed this subtle detail both surprised Itsuki and ignited passion in his heart.

The sketchbook and paints were brand new. Itsuki hastily said thanks as Tokiwa returned to his work. Tokiwa raised a hand in acknowledgement, his back still turned.

Itsuki calmed down and opened the sketchbook. He thought about the whiteness of the drawing paper the kindergarten girl had given him yesterday, and the rich color of the navy blue crayon.

Itsuki painted furiously the whole afternoon, until Tokiwa forced him to stop. After years without painting, he wanted to keep on going.

He now saw Tokiwa working in front of the shelf and stopped to watch him. Tokiwa looked over his shoulder, sensing Itsuki's gaze. He stubbed out his cigarette in his ashtray and came to Itsuki's side.

"Is there something you need? Are you cold?" he inquired.

"I'm fine, thanks," Itsuki said hastily.

The workshop was cold in spite of the heater, so Tokiwa made sure that Itsuki was warmly dressed, even though he himself just wore his usual sweater and jeans.

Tokiwa glanced at Itsuki's sketchbook.

"What lovely colors," he commented.

Itsuki was painting an unusual landscape that included the inside of Tokiwa's workshop, as well as the sea and sky seen through the window. On previous pages were paintings of things he'd recently seen, including Tokiwa's garden.

Itsuki.

Tokiwa called his name softly. Itsuki came to his senses as Tokiwa stole his breath again with a deep kiss. Tokiwa traced the line of Itsuki's lips and their tongues danced together in Itsuki's mouth. Itsuki's shoulders trembled at the familiar heat and scent of tobacco. The hand that caressed Itsuki's hair tightened into a fist, grasping the strands.

"Mmm...Aah..."

As their lips parted, Itsuki's own moans spilled from his throat, his cheeks burning. Flustered, Itsuki turned his head away, only to have Tokiwa pull it back and kiss the tip of his nose. Itsuki sighed with pleasure as Tokiwa brushed his fingers through his hair.

Itsuki no longer felt the urge to resist.

Since the day of the kindergarten project, Tokiwa had visibly changed. He was no longer chilly and indifferent to Itsuki during the day, nor forceful at night. He was simply pleasant to be with. Night and day, he would croon Itsuki's name in that soft, deep voice.

When they were together in the workshop, he would look at Itsuki's sketches from time to time and offer advice. He would touch Itsuki gently before returning to his own worktable. He would never linger

long, but Itsuki liked that Tokiwa was watching over him. This was how it had been when they were friends, now they were about to go back in time together.

One other thing had changed.

Tokiwa no longer pushed Itsuki for sex, never going further than kissing or caressing. Every night, Itsuki fell asleep wrapped in Tokiwa's arms, and woke up every morning to Tokiwa's face. Tokiwa would hold him close and kiss him. That was all.

Itsuki felt that Tokiwa treasured him now. Tokiwa was not a man of many words, but Itsuki knew that Tokiwa watched over him protectively with kind words and soft glances.

When Itsuki thought about it, Tokiwa had been watching out for him right from the start. If this had not been the case, he would have never rescued Itsuki when he fell in the river, or given him his pain medication in the middle of that first night.

Tokiwa had cared for Itsuki all along, but it had taken Itsuki a while to realize this.

Tokiwa's hand touched his own, which was still gripping the paintbrush. He let go of the brush at Tokiwa's gentle urging and curled his hand into a loose fist.

"Take a break before it hurts," Tokiwa advised.

"It's okay," Itsuki murmured. "I'm taking breaks."

"Okay, then," Tokiwa replied, his face so close that Itsuki could feel his breath on his lips. He stroked Itsuki's hand with his fingers. Tokiwa's hand was considerably larger than Itsuki's, perhaps due to the

physical nature of his work. Itsuki's looked puny by comparison, and he giggled when he thought about it.

"Your legs aren't cold, are they?" Tokiwa asked.

"I have the blankets and the heater," Itsuki replied. "I'm more worried about you than me. Aren't you cold, sensei, er, I mean, Tokiwa?"

"I'm used to it. I've always had a strong tolerance for heat and cold," Tokiwa said smoothly, suddenly glancing at the blanket wrapped around Itsuki's legs. "Shall we go to the hospital tomorrow? The right leg isn't healed yet, but I think the cast is ready to come off the other, don't you think so?"

"Yes." Itsuki nodded. "Tomorrow."

That word made his heart ache.

Although the right leg still hurt, the pain in his left ankle had completely vanished. If he had something to lean on, he could walk on his own.

If there was no problem with his left leg, he could probably return to Yamabe's side tomorrow. He could borrow crutches from the hospital, and the station wasn't far from there. He could catch a train there, or take a taxi.

But he found the idea very depressing.

For that matter, he could probably go home today. Even if he couldn't use the phone, he could use a walking stick instead of a cane, and go limping to the nearest house, borrow the phone and call a cab, or ask Kasaoka to come meet him. Then it would be over.

It had only really snowed-in the first few days at Tokiwa's house. From that point on, he wasn't exactly

"trapped" there. It would have been easy to borrow a phone and call home.

But for some reason, Itsuki didn't even try. He simply didn't want to.

He sensed Tokiwa coming closer and looked up. Tokiwa lifted his face for a gentle kiss. Itsuki closed his eyes and felt Tokiwa's long, cold fingers stroking his temples. He felt dizzy as Tokiwa gently nibbled his tongue and wrapped his arms around his waist.

If Yamabe's cage was like a glass case for a doll, Tokiwa's cage is like a baby's swaddling blanket, Itsuki thought.

A doll inside a glass case cannot disobey its owner. All it can do is stare through the clear glass towards the outside world.

But a baby blanket protects a child against the wind and sun, and softly covers the skin without binding. You can't move when you're wrapped in it, but you can remove it at any time.

Itsuki had not asked for the sketchbook or paints, but only two days after receiving them, he had filled almost every page with color. Only a few blank pages remained.

A haircut, art supplies, a sketchbook, and physical affection. Tokiwa had given him everything he ever wanted, and was kinder than Itsuki ever could have imagined. Itsuki felt like he would cry.

Now Itsuki realized that Tokiwa's cage was a gentle one. Once he understood this, there was no turning back.

He had finally found peace in the arms of this

man. Itsuki felt the warmth of Tokiwa's lips and his heart began to ache.

This was his last chance to be with Tokiwa like this.
*I'll go see Yamabe with you two weeks from now.
 Until then, you'll stay here with me.*

Only five days away. That would be the end of his life with Tokiwa, he would have to return to Yamabe.

Whether or not Tokiwa agreed to be Yamabe's heir, Tokiwa wouldn't stay at Yamabe's house for very long. A few days at most, though he'd probably leave the same day.

After that, Itsuki would return to his daily life as Yamabe's pet. That was Itsuki's lot, the life he had chosen for himself.

Itsuki heard the phone ringing and Tokiwa released him from his embrace.

"Don't go yet," Itsuki begged, and Tokiwa nibbled his lips. Itsuki's shoulders jumped in surprise, and Tokiwa caressed his back with one large hand. He looked up at Tokiwa, and their eyes met. Itsuki's heart skipped a beat when he saw Tokiwa's loving expression.

"I'll be back," Tokiwa said.

He gently pecked Itsuki on the lips and left the room. Itsuki felt his entire body tingle. No matter how hard he tried to calm down, he couldn't stop glancing at the door.

Tokiwa returned some minutes later and coldly passed the phone to Itsuki.

"It's for you," he said. "From Yamabe."

Itsuki blinked, but Tokiwa had already left the room.

Itsuki sighed. Kasaoka had called him yesterday, with the news that Yamabe was getting worse. Itsuki never imagined Yamabe would contact him directly in his present condition.

"Having fun at that scoundrel's house?" Yamabe greeted. "I wonder if you'll still like it better over here."

Yamabe was unusually talkative. He complained that Kasaoka was treating him like an invalid, not even letting him go out to eat. He even had to stop working on a new project. It was the liveliest conversation Itsuki had ever had with Yamabe, though the sensei sounded like he was struggling to sound healthier than he really was.

They had spent eight years together. As a result, Itsuki knew more about Yamabe's health and mood than even Kasaoka did. Though he couldn't see Yamabe in person, he could tell from his voice that he was feeling more ill.

"How terrible of me, causing you trouble until the bitter end," Yamabe said. "If Tokiwa refuses to comply, I guess it can't be helped. Come home as soon as the time feels right."

Yamabe paused a second. Itsuki got the impression that the old man was smiling bitterly.

"I never thought I'd feel this lonely without you around," Yamabe told him. "I can't say this to Kasaoka, but I wish you'd come home as soon as possible."

It was unusual for Yamabe to speak so openly, and Itsuki held back his reply. It was the first time Itsuki

had heard Yamabe admit to feeling vulnerable.

Itsuki knew Yamabe could face down any opponent. The old man preferred not to show his own weaknesses and always maintained his distance, even from his lovers.

Yamabe's condition must be even worse than Kasaoka had let on. Itsuki felt intensely guilty as this realization sunk in.

"I'm sorry. I'll try to," he assured Yamabe. "In the meantime, eat well and get plenty of rest. Don't push yourself too hard."

"Don't worry, Kasaoka's making me behave," Yamabe told Itsuki. "But everything just tastes bad to me. I've either lost my sense of taste or it's because you're not here."

Itsuki was familiar with Yamabe's sulking, and knew what the man was driving at.

"I can probably come home tomorrow or the day after," Itsuki said. "Until then, please take of yourself, and don't forget your medicine. I'll be checking with Kasaoka and the cook to make sure you're still eating."

"Okay, then," Yamabe replied, sounding happier and more relaxed.

"I'll call again later," Itsuki promised. "You sound tired, please rest now."

"Maybe I am tired. Well, I'll get to bed and look forward to seeing you soon," Yamabe said cheerfully, then hung up the phone.

Itsuki turned off the handset.

He could have gone home days ago. Now he was filled with shame at his own cowardice. There were

so many things that he should have told Yamabe about, including his haircut.

He had also violated the contract that forbids romantic involvement. Worse yet, he had reciprocated Tokiwa's feelings. Staring at the silent phone, Itsuki found himself laughing.

He didn't know how Tokiwa perceived their relationship. At any rate, their two weeks were almost over. Just then the phone was snatched away from him.

Itsuki looked up in surprise. At some point, Tokiwa had crept up on him from behind. Tokiwa checked the handset's power button, then dropped it on his work table. The hard noise echoed throughout the workshop.

"Tokiwa?" Itsuki began.

He was cut off by a glare so hard and cold it made him feel skewered.

"Are you going back?" Tokiwa snapped.

"Yamabe-sensei is much worse," Itsuki explained. "Sorry, but I need to leave tomorrow."

"So you go running the second they call for you, huh?" Tokiwa growled. "I'd like to tell you to do as you please, but I don't think you really want to go back there."

Itsuki looked up at Tokiwa's sharp tone and was met with a glare.

"You should have told him you were staying here for two weeks," Tokiwa said sharply. "In case you've forgotten, I'll remind you again—I have no intention of letting you leave before then. You'll just have to put up with it for five more days."

"But I can't!" Itsuki protested. "I promised Yamabe-sensei I'd be home as soon as possible. My only reason for staying here was because I couldn't drive with my injury."

Itsuki stopped. He was unable to continue, silenced by Tokiwa's angry look. Tokiwa said nothing, but Itsuki knew that this was probably the worst of it. Tokiwa seldom bothered himself with anything beyond his work, and he was not a person who was angered easily. Itsuki experienced a strange sense of *déjà vu* nonetheless.

"Do you really want to go home already?" Tokiwa asked in a low growl. "With just one phone call, one command, you change your loyalties completely. He's done an amazing job of breaking your will, hasn't he? Did he use your family to threaten you, is that how he trained you so well?"

It took a few seconds for Tokiwa's words to sink in.

"D-don't be rude!" Itsuki exclaimed. "Yamabe isn't that kind of person!"

"Please explain how a person who sends his beloved personal assistant to a stranger's house as bait, isn't 'that kind of person.' I'd really like to know!" Tokiwa yelled back.

"But—"

Before Itsuki could respond, Tokiwa kissed him forcefully, without a shred of mercy. Itsuki was pinned to the back of the chair as Tokiwa devoured his lips. His instinct was to flee, but Tokiwa dug his fingers into him so deeply, he was totally restrained. His fruitless struggle

caused his breath to catch in his throat.

This embrace was markedly different from before. The fingers that grasped his chin and the arm that gripped his waist held him so tightly that his bones felt like they were being crushed.

Even if he tried to push him away, Itsuki was no match for Tokiwa's strength, and he let his arms fall limply in despair.

"No!" he cried out.

Tokiwa reached over the chair and caressed Itsuki's groin over his clothes. Itsuki knew where this was leading and his body tensed with fear, remembering Tokiwa's violent lovemaking of previous nights.

Itsuki's hips lurched as Tokiwa probed his navel with his fingers. Tokiwa stripped the blanket from Itsuki's legs, yanked him out of the chair, and tossed his body onto the sofa.

Itsuki was unable to make a sound. Tokiwa fixed him with a cold gaze that seemed to freeze any questions or protests. When a tiny whimper escaped from Itsuki's throat, Tokiwa bit his lower lip, then kissed him so hard he couldn't breathe. Tokiwa tore Itsuki's shirt off, scattering the buttons on the floor.

Itsuki trembled helplessly at the urgency of Tokiwa's fevered caresses. Tokiwa sunk his teeth into Itsuki's collarbone, pinching his nipples hard. Itsuki squirmed with pain. Tokiwa pinned Itsuki's wrists against the sofa.

Tokiwa moved from Itsuki's collarbone to his chest, tearing at his clothes and groping at his thighs. Itsuki was paralyzed by Tokiwa's forcefulness, unable

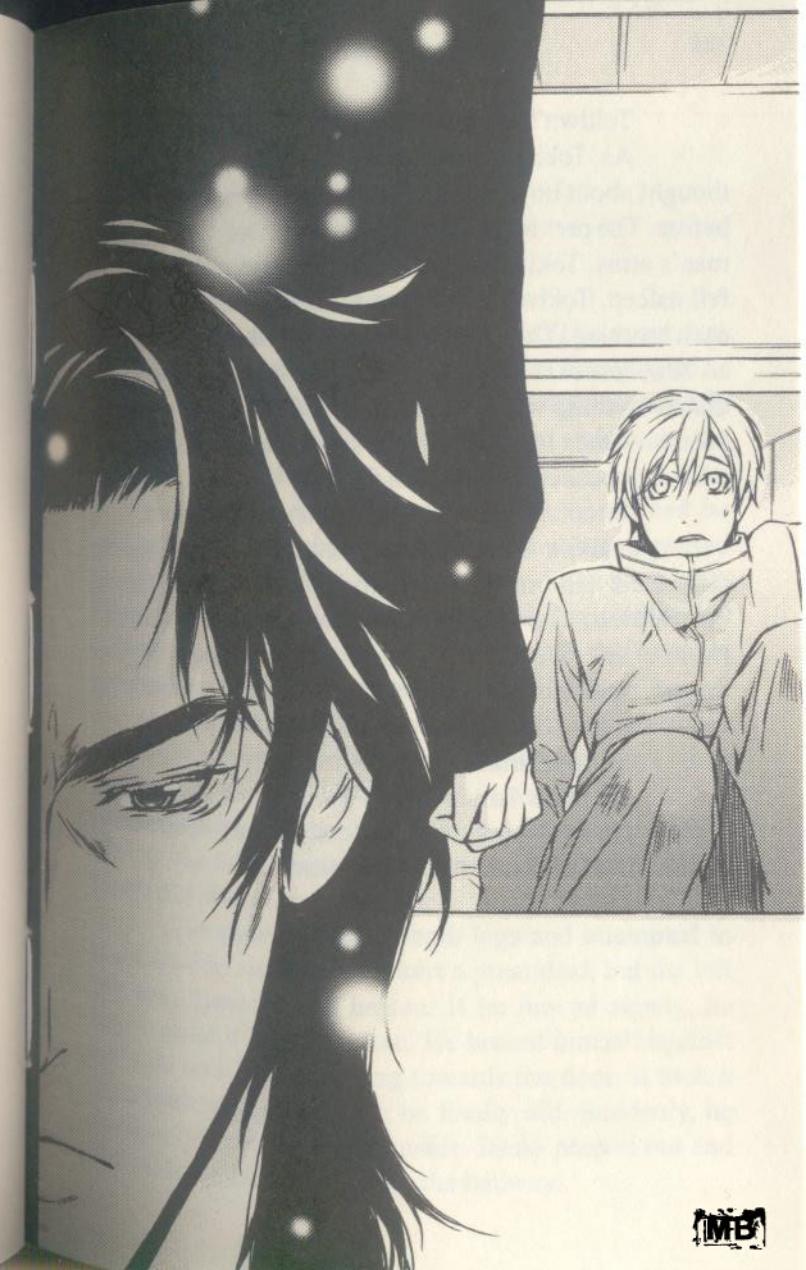
to struggle. Tokiwa clicked his tongue heartlessly at Itsuki's helpless state. The next moment, Tokiwa ripped his clothes all the way off and gripped the back of Itsuki's knees.

Itsuki bit his lip as he felt Tokiwa's fingers and hot, wet tongue start probing his asshole. Tokiwa's behavior seemed rushed and merciless compared to other nights. Ignoring the look of fear in Itsuki's eyes, Tokiwa mechanically proceeded, like it was some dreadful duty he just had to perform. Itsuki's emotional distress at Tokiwa's wild behavior was worse than the physical pain he felt. The skin that had once been inflamed with passion now felt as cold as ice, and he was totally unable to move.

Annoyed by Itsuki's silent trembling, Tokiwa suddenly stopped. Looking down at Itsuki with cold indifference, he yanked his hips closer. He didn't bother undressing, and just unzipped the front of his jeans and took out his cock. Then Tokiwa entered Itsuki as the sofa creaked. The pain was so intense that Itsuki felt as if he was being torn apart.

Tokiwa paid no mind to Itsuki's suffering. He pulled on Itsuki's hips with all his might, thrusting with violent pressure that caused Itsuki to cry out in pain. The world went white before his eyes with Tokiwa so deep inside him.

A cold sweat ran down Itsuki's spine. Even his first time had not been this brutal, and he was forced to realize how gentle Tokiwa had been with him then. Tokiwa had never looked at Itsuki this cruelly before. Itsuki truly didn't understand what had pushed Tokiwa this far.



Tokiwa's anger made Itsuki's heart ache.

As Tokiwa mercilessly thrust into him, Itsuki thought about how Tokiwa had been only a few minutes before. The previous nights, Itsuki had slept safely in this man's arms. Tokiwa had held him with loving care as he fell asleep. Tokiwa's face was the first thing Itsuki saw each morning. They had spent time together cocooned in an atmosphere of peace and quiet. Maybe Tokiwa knew that everything was temporary, and that was why he had been so kind. In spite of this, Itsuki didn't understand what had pushed Tokiwa this far over the edge.

"Stop...please!" Itsuki managed to cry out.

Itsuki's wrists stung with pain from being restrained. He couldn't bear to look at Tokiwa's face, but Tokiwa pulled his head back and sunk his teeth into Itsuki's lips. He forced Itsuki's mouth open with his tongue, and Itsuki felt as if he was being devoured. He wanted to ask why, but he couldn't find the words.

You are nothing but property.

Tokiwa's harsh words were like a slow-acting poison, gradually infecting his entire body. Tormented by this illusion, Itsuki lost consciousness.

Chapter 10

Itsvki woke up a little past six. The room was dark, the lights were off, and the sky was dim outside.

He jumped out of bed, but his body was instantly wracked with pain and he was forced to sink back into the sheets.

Once the pain disappeared, Itsuki realized he was in Tokiwa's bedroom. Itsuki recalled being carried into the bedroom after spending a long time on the sofa. Tokiwa would not tolerate any back-talk from Itsuki, but took special care when he placed him on the bed. He carefully positioned Itsuki's legs, asked him if he felt any pain, and kissed him once again. Itsuki had been exhausted by what had happened in the workshop, when Tokiwa had ignored his desperate pleas.

Relieved to see he was alone, Itsuki stared at the ceiling. He felt terribly thirsty and craved a drink, so he scooted to the edge of the bed.

He slowly dropped both legs and attempted to stand up. His right leg still hurt a great deal, but the left one was more or less healed. If he moved slowly, he might make it to the kitchen. He braced himself against the wall and began moving towards the door. It took a long time to get there, but he finally did. Suddenly, he thought he heard a voice outside. Itsuki peeped out and saw nobody. He stepped into the hallway.

"Still here?" Itsuki heard a voice call out as he turned the corner to the kitchen.

He saw a familiar young man standing at the entrance to the house.

"You're kidding me! You've been here since last week? Is it because of your injury? Or are you helping Tokiwa with another job?" the hairdresser babbled.

Itsuki was too out of it to respond properly, and only gave a vague look.

"Hey, are you one of Toki's co-workers?" the young man persisted. "I heard he's working on a big project now, is it true? He never leaves the house these days. Last time around he went to the trouble of having you supervise the painting. I have no idea who he normally works with."

"Wh-what big project?" Itsuki stammered.

The young man eyed him suspiciously. "He never told you about it? Then why are you here? It seems kind of weird..."

"I suppose so." Itsuki nodded. "Even if we were friends, it would seem strange. But I guess that's because I'm not really Tokiwa-sensei's friend."

Itsuki felt as though he was being cut to pieces as he said this, but once he put his feelings into words, he found it almost impossible to stop.

"Right now, being here is simply my job," he confessed. "In five days, this will change. After that, I won't be back again or cause Tokiwa-sensei any more trouble, so please just drop it."

"What are you talking about?" the young man asked, then suddenly exclaimed, "Hey, your face is

turning blue! What's wrong? Wait a minute!"

The hairdresser's face suddenly changed as Itsuki clung to the wall for dear life, his vision going blurry. The young man hurriedly took off his shoes and came running down the hallway.

"You've got a fever," he declared, feeling Itsuki's forehead with cold hands. "Why are you trying to walk around on your own? Toki, Toki, come quickly!"

Itsuki grabbed the young man's wrist to silence him. The hairdresser glared at him.

"Please stop. I'm fine. I can walk by myself," Itsuki insisted.

"But you've still got a broken leg!" the young man protested.

"I'm fine. I don't want to bother Tokiwa-sensei. Please let me go." As he said this, Itsuki began sliding down the wall until he was sitting on the floor.

The young man watched Itsuki in silence for a moment, and then spoke with astonishment, "Get a grip on yourself! Here, grab my arm!"

"No, I don't want to bother you..." Itsuki protested weakly.

"It's no bother! You're a sick person. If you don't let me help, I'll call Toki, and you don't want that, do you?" the hairdresser said threateningly, pulling Itsuki upright.

For all of Itsuki's efforts, his left leg felt weak again. He let himself be led into the living room and rolled onto the sofa.

The hairdresser covered him with a blanket saying, "Your leg still hasn't healed, and you're

stumbling around with a fever. What were you thinking? Ask Toki to help you. I'm sure he wouldn't mind." He placed his hand on Itsuki's forehead again, and Itsuki grimaced. "You look thirsty. Want something to drink? Sports drink might be better than water if you have a fever. Now stay put!"

With that, he left the living room, leaving the door open. Itsuki didn't even have the strength to get up and close it. His chest felt tight, so he closed his eyes. Though his skin was hot, the inside of his body felt strangely cold. The blanket slipped down as Itsuki fought an overwhelming urge to cry. Maybe the scent of Tokiwa's cigarettes on the blanket triggered the emotion. He curled into a ball and shuddered.

"He's injured! He should be examined by a doctor and sent home! You're a jerk with no common sense!" Itsuki overheard the hairdresser say. "How can you let your friend suffer like this? He looks pitiful in there! Let him leave!"

"Don't butt into other people's business, scissors boy," Tokiwa's voice answered coldly. "You've met Itsuki several times already."

"A moment ago he was stumbling around the hallway pale as a ghost!" the hairdresser yelled.

"He was in the hallway?" Tokiwa's voice suddenly became concerned.

"Just around the corner there, leaning against the wall," the young man answered. "He collapsed while I was talking to him. I took him into the living room. Toki! Toki, snap out of it!"

Itsuki suddenly heard footsteps approaching. He

scrunched up his body and hid his face. He couldn't look at Tokiwa right now. The memory of what happened last night still roiled in his brain.

"Itsuki?" Tokiwa called softly.

Itsuki lay still, pretending to sleep. That voice filled him with a pain he had never known before. Tokiwa gently swept Itsuki's hair away from his face. Itsuki knew that touch well, but it was as if he was being touched for the first time. Tokiwa was silent, and Itsuki could feel him staring.

"He's already asleep?" the hairdresser gasped. "Better not wake him up. We'll leave him a drink nearby. And shouldn't we bring that wheelchair in from your car?"

"Good idea," Tokiwa agreed. "Can you do me a favor and get it?"

"Sure thing," the hairdresser replied. "But why did you leave it in the car all this time? Itsuki should have it nearby. If he'd had access to it, he wouldn't have tried walking on his own."

"I suppose so," Tokiwa admitted.

"Give me the key, then," the hairdresser said. "Anything else you want me to bring in? He's wearing your pajamas, right? Does he have a change of clothes in the car?"

"I'm lending him my pajamas because he doesn't have anything," Tokiwa replied.

Itsuki heard the hairdresser leave, and realized he'd been left alone with Tokiwa.

"I'm moving you to the bedroom. Don't struggle," Tokiwa instructed.

Before Itsuki could respond, Tokiwa lifted him up, blanket and all. Itsuki continued to act as if asleep, squeezing his eyes shut. Suddenly, he felt the mattress beneath him. Tokiwa straightened his legs, covered him with a blanket, and then left the room.

Lying on his side, Itsuki felt as thirsty as ever. He heard footsteps a moment later, and something placed on the bedside table. Itsuki was relieved that his face was obscured by shadows cast by the door. A moment later, a second set of footsteps approached.

"Toki! I told you not to wake him up!" the hairdresser exclaimed.

"He's still sleeping," Tokiwa pointed out. "I thought it might be more comfortable for him in here."

"Oh, all right," the hairdresser conceded. "But what about you? Where will you sleep tonight?"

"Wherever," Tokiwa answered. "There's lots of rooms here."

"But won't you catch a cold?" the young man commented. "Your legs are too long for the sofa. I can lend you a futon. My friends sleep over a lot so I have an extra."

"I appreciate the offer," Tokiwa said. "Hey, wasn't Aota talking about some photo book?"

"Oh, yeah," the young man said. "It's got a picture of a building by that guy I was talking about before."

"I'll go get it," Tokiwa said. "Wait in the living room."

"Sure thing," the hairdresser said. "By the way, I left the wheelchair by the front door. I'll clean the

wheels and bring it inside later. It'll make it easier for him, unless you took the wheelchair away to punish him. In that case, it's another story altogether."

"You really think I'd do something like that?" Tokiwa demanded.

"Well, it's none of my business, but..." The young man's voice tapered off uncertainly.

Itsuki held his breath as he listened to their exchange.

During the entire conversation, Tokiwa had rested his hand on Itsuki's head, running his fingers through his hair.

Itsuki.

Itsuki realized his shoulders had been trembling. He felt Tokiwa's fingers caressing his head, stroking his cheek, lifting his hair away from his eyes. Still as a rock, Itsuki felt Tokiwa kiss his eyelids, and then retreat again. He didn't understand why Tokiwa had kissed him.

"I'm sorry," Tokiwa whispered in his ear before moving away.

The sound of footsteps disappeared as the door closed. The room was dark again, and Itsuki finally opened his eyes. He shifted his body towards the bedside table, where a pitcher filled with sports drink sat beneath the glow of a small lamp.

Though he was parched, Itsuki drank slowly, pausing between sips. He returned the empty glass to the tray and lay down again.

He couldn't banish the memory of Tokiwa's voice from his heart, but then he thought about Tokiwa's behavior in the workshop last night. The kisses they had

shared before Yamabe's call had been so different. Last night's had been merely expressions of physical desire, with no greater meaning or reason.

You are nothing but property, you need to realize this and submit to me.

Those words kept returning to haunt him. Last night, Tokiwa never listened to what Itsuki had to say. He only fixed him with his icy glare.

Tokiwa no longer called Itsuki by his first name. In the beginning, Tokiwa had been pushy, but there had been some kindness in his touch. He had treated Itsuki as a nuisance, but still refused to leave his side.

Itsuki realized he was nothing more than a borrowed doll. Because Tokiwa had been kind, he had allowed himself to forget this. Tokiwa still viewed Itsuki as Yamabe's beloved pet. Because Itsuki was property, a trinket, it didn't matter what happened to him. Tokiwa had gotten used to seeing him this way. Itsuki had deceived himself into thinking there was something more between them.

Itsuki simply wanted to be close to Tokiwa. He wanted to stay with him, be touched by him. He didn't care if Tokiwa only thought of him as a toy.

Itsuki had chosen this himself. Coming to this house, staying here, getting involved with Tokiwa—Itsuki had brought all of these things upon himself.

You two may be friends, but it seems kind of weird...

The hairdresser's words were so accurate they were painful. Itsuki wasn't Tokiwa's friend, or acquaintance, or even his lover. Itsuki was nothing but a

plaything to Tokiwa.

Itsuki should have known Tokiwa hated him from the beginning. He knew that Tokiwa scorned him as a doll, paid for by Yamabe's money. He understood why Tokiwa glared at him coldly.

Itsuki wasn't even allowed to cut his own hair. Why should Tokiwa even care about someone like that?

Itsuki suddenly thought about the hairdresser, whom Tokiwa had been chatting with a moment before. He was even younger than Itsuki, but Tokiwa treated him as an equal. The hairdresser didn't care what Tokiwa thought and said whatever he pleased. Itsuki had never been that self-assured in the past, and even less so now.

It must seem funny to Tokiwa to compare the two young men, opposites as they were.

Itsuki behaved like a wind-up doll, with no free will or courage. But their relationship would soon be over. Surely, Tokiwa never intended for their affair to last longer than two weeks.

Tomorrow, I'll leave, Itsuki decided. Tokiwa had told him he would see Yamabe, and surely he would keep his promise. He was honest to a fault.

There was no reason for Itsuki to keep delaying here, but he still wanted to stay. He laughed at his own foolishness.

He wanted to be close to Tokiwa, if only for a short while. Smelling the familiar scent of Tokiwa's cigarettes on the sheets, Itsuki bit his lip in sorrow.

I'm not really Tokiwa-sensei's friend.

His own words cut like a knife to his heart.

Chapter 11

Early the next morning, Kasaoka called again. Yamabe was drastically worse. Tokiwa hung up the phone and acted quickly. He woke Itsuki up and got him ready to leave. Twenty minutes later, they were in Tokiwa's RV, headed for Yamabe's estate.

It's over, Itsuki thought, head pressed against the window of the passenger seat.

From time to time, Tokiwa asked him if he was cold or in pain. Itsuki simply shook his head. He felt Tokiwa glance over at him, but Itsuki was determined to keep quiet. If he opened his mouth, he was bound to say something stupid. He didn't want to leave Tokiwa with unpleasant memories.

They managed to beat rush hour traffic, and arrived at Yamabe's house well before noon.

Yamabe had been rushed to the hospital the night before, but he was already back home, settled in his own bed. He had pressured the doctor into releasing him that morning.

"I hate hospitals. I can rest better here," Yamabe said, sounding just the same. But he'd lost a lot of weight in the last two weeks, and his complexion looked pallid. Even so, his sense of humor seemed to be intact.

"We have a lot to talk about today," he said, fixing his eyes on Tokiwa.

Kasaoka instantly objected. "The doctor said not to push yourself. You should spend the day resting. You can talk with Tokiwa-sensei tomorrow. Is that okay, Tokiwa-sensei?"

Kasaoka's tone sounded more forceful than usual. Tokiwa agreed and asked if he could use the workshop, then slipped out of the room.

Yamabe called out to Itsuki, who was huddled near the door.

"Welcome home, Itsuki. Thank you for your hard work. You really helped me out."

Yamabe's tone was pleasant, but Itsuki could not look him in the eye. He somehow managed to mumble an apology, and Yamabe replied with a bitter smile.

"Tokiwa's a tough nut to crack," the old man said. "But forget about that, I'm just glad to have you back. Let me see your face."

Itsuki nodded and approached Yamabe, stopping next to the bed.

"Come a little closer," Yamabe urged.

Itsuki moved forward with hesitation, and Yamabe reached out to pull at Itsuki's short hair asking, "How are your legs? And what happened to your hair?"

"The left ankle was just sprained, but the bone cracked on the right one," Itsuki answered. "It must look horrible."

"Can you walk on it? Does it hurt?" Yamabe persisted.

"Only if I have something to hold onto. The pain has lessened quite a bit," Itsuki replied, showing off his cane. "As for my hair," Itsuki went on. "It was cut

against my will. It must look strange to you."

"Really?" Yamabe whispered.

Itsuki looked at him and was met with a gaze that was oddly nostalgic.

"It's the same haircut you had when I first met you," Yamabe said with wonder.

"Sorry," Itsuki mumbled. "I'll get a wig or something soon."

"No need," Yamabe said. "Actually, this style suits you better now."

Itsuki didn't reply.

"I once thought you looked better with long hair, but eight years have passed since then. People change," Yamabe said pleasantly, closing his eyes and turning on his side.

Itsuki followed Kasaoka out of the sick room. Kasaoka calmly handed Itsuki a cellphone to replace his broken one, and told him to spend the day resting in his room. Itsuki blinked, unused to taking directions again.

"You don't seem to be well," Kasaoka went on. "Get some sleep. This afternoon we'll go to the hospital and get your leg examined. Can you get rid of the cast on your left foot at least?"

"Yes," Itsuki said. "The right leg needs more time, though."

"I understand," said Kasaoka. "Don't push yourself too hard. We'll get a wheelchair if necessary. And stay with Yamabe-sensei as much as possible. From now on, that's your job."

Itsuki nodded in response to Kasaoka's quiet words.

Yamabe had reached the point of no return. The illness was progressing more quickly than expected, and there were complications. Though he had seemed peaceful a moment ago, he was suffering a great deal, according to Kasaoka, and always had painkillers nearby.

"By the way, did Tokiwa say anything about the inheritance?" Kasaoka asked.

"Nothing," Itsuki replied. "He doesn't seem to be very interested."

"Oh, really?" Kasaoka replied, not seeming surprised.

In the past, Itsuki's room had adjoined Yamabe's. Now his room had been moved to another part of the house. Once he arrived in his own room, Itsuki took a deep breath. Tokiwa had carved him a makeshift cane since they couldn't bring the wheelchair to Yamabe's house. Itsuki's heart swelled with emotion whenever he looked at it.

Late last night, Tokiwa had come into the bedroom. Itsuki's fever had risen in the night. As he was struggling to breathe, strong arms had picked him up and given him water and medicine. Itsuki managed to choke down the pills before lying down again. Tokiwa sat beside him, stroking Itsuki's hair and placing a cool palm on his forehead. Itsuki smiled a little, thinking that Tokiwa's excessive kindness was just another form of cruelty.

He knew he had to let go of his feelings for the man, but he couldn't. He knew it was useless, but he still wanted to go after Tokiwa.

Itsuki shook his head, fighting to suppress the emotions he thought he'd already extinguished. He finished changing and got into bed.

It was hard to sleep in this unfamiliar room. His fever had gone down, but he still drifted in and out of consciousness.

Early the next morning, Itsuki went to the hospital. The doctor removed the cast from his left leg and lent him a pair of crutches.

Itsuki spent the rest of the day in the chair next to Yamabe's bed.

Itsuki saw Tokiwa the next day, right before Tokiwa's talk with Yamabe. The meeting turned out to be much shorter than expected, but Itsuki didn't hear what passed between the two men. Neither Itsuki nor even Kasaoka were present; Yamabe wanted it that way. The only other person in the room was Yamabe's lawyer.

Kasaoka probably already knew what would be discussed, but he said nothing to Itsuki, and Itsuki didn't bother asking.

The night before Tokiwa was supposed to go home, Yamabe took another turn for the worse. Itsuki first noticed that Yamabe was acting strangely. By the time the nurse arrived, Yamabe had lost consciousness and was rushed to the hospital again.

Itsuki's memories from that point on were strange and disjointed. He stayed with Yamabe the entire time, but he couldn't remember which hospital floor Yamabe was on, or even his room number. He couldn't remember the faces of Yamabe's doctor or the nurse.

But the sounds of the medical equipment, the way the snow looked outside the window, the shape of Yamabe's hand—these things were so clearly etched in his memory that Itsuki could have painted a picture of them.

Yamabe passed away quietly at dawn, after lying unconscious for three days. Kasaoka and Tokiwa came running when they heard the news, as well as four women who had been Yamabe's lovers.

Itsuki went back to the house first to prepare. He tidied Yamabe's old bedroom in a mechanical fashion, feeling as if it was all a bad dream. When the sensei's body was brought in, the sight of Yamabe lying on his familiar bed, face draped with a white sheet, completely unnerved Itsuki.

Yamabe had passed away two months before the doctor predicted he would. The sensei hoped to last until spring, so he could see the cherry blossoms.

"I plan to see them every year, but never get around to actually doing it," Yamabe had confessed.

Itsuki remembered the bitter smile on Yamabe's face when he said this. Now the old man would never speak again. Itsuki crouched in the corner of the room and realized that he didn't hate Yamabe after all.

But Itsuki still felt angry about so many things that had happened over the past eight years. Giving up the totem pole. Being forced to cut Tokiwa out of his life. The lonely nights when he ached for the freedom to chop off his hair, give up the tiresome politeness, return to school and pursue his dreams. At those times, Itsuki really hated Yamabe.

Yamabe had controlled Itsuki's life for eight years as his own private game, molding Itsuki's appearance and behavior, taking pleasure in his transformation.

Even so, over the past eight years, Yamabe had been the person closest to Itsuki. Yamabe had been the only person who loved Itsuki unconditionally during this time.

His mother had died of pneumonia last year. In the end, she no longer realized that Itsuki was her son. She thought that he and his sister were her married relatives. The last time Itsuki had seen his mother smile was when he was a student, when she would see him off in the mornings. His sister was Itsuki's only living blood relation, but she had cut him off out of her life after she was sent to boarding school. She even refused to speak to him at their mother's funeral.

Itsuki felt sad at this distance between them, but knew it couldn't be helped. Despite all attempts at discretion, gossip travels quickly. At some point, Itsuki's sister had learned that Itsuki was Yamabe's "lover," and could no longer look him in the eye.

Itsuki would return from his monthly family visits feeling absolutely exhausted, but Yamabe always cheerfully welcomed him back.

"Welcome home!" he would beam. Strange as it seemed, those words meant a lot to Itsuki. They reassured him that he still had a place somewhere.

Yamabe was a special person to Itsuki, but not as a lover or as family. They had more of a master-pet relationship. But even though Yamabe treated him like a

doll, there was no question that he cherished him.

Itsuki approached Yamabe's corpse, hobbling on his crutches. He didn't touch the sheet over the body, but placed his hand on top of Yamabe's bony one. The flesh felt stiff and cold. Yamabe was definitely gone. He had departed the world of the living. Now there was no one to correct Itsuki's grammar, or scold him for wearing the wrong clothes. No one to say Itsuki's name and smile. Itsuki felt a giant hole open up in his heart.

I'm alone at last, he thought.

Chapter 12

Yamabe had a private funeral, followed by a large memorial service organized by his workshop. There were very few people in Yamabe's inner circle, and no dramatic displays of grief. Yamabe wanted to be simply cremated, but there was still the question of the will.

At the funeral, it became clear that Tokiwa would inherit the estate. Though they were both residing in the mansion, Itsuki hadn't seen Tokiwa since the hospital. Kasaoka had taken on the role of Tokiwa's personal assistant. Itsuki had been informed that he was no longer needed to help out. He had fulfilled his duty, staying with Yamabe until the very end.

Itsuki spent an entire night sitting with Yamabe's dead body. After the cremation, the remains were then transferred from the bedroom to the funeral hall, where an altar had been created. Itsuki stayed out of the way and went to his room.

It had been raining since morning, and the dark gray sky looked oppressive.

The usually quiet hallway was now bustling with activity. Itsuki felt left behind, his world turned upside down. "Left behind" was actually fairly accurate. Itsuki had actually been Yamabe's companion, the "personal assistant" title merely for show. Now he was viewed

solely as Yamabe's former pet.

No one cared about the feelings of someone else's pet. One person's beloved doll was nothing more than junk in the eyes of another. Itsuki had no value to anyone now that Yamabe was gone.

"Hashimoto, are you alone? Where's Tokiwa-sensei?"

Itsuki looked up in surprise as someone walked towards him. It was Kurasawa, one of the apprentices. He had joined the workshop the year before, and was just a year younger than Itsuki. He was a slender man of the same height as Tokiwa.

"I have no idea," Itsuki replied.

"Is Tokiwa-sensei really taking over the workshop?" Kurasawa asked.

Itsuki looked up in disbelief.

"Why do you ask?" he gasped.

"Some people say he will, others say he won't," Kurasawa replied. "If Tokiwa accepts the position, I figured you'd continue as his personal assistant."

"I...I...I don't..." Itsuki stuttered.

Kurasawa gave him a strange look. "Am I wrong? They say Tokiwa-sensei is fond of you, so it seemed likely that you would become his assistant. Haven't you been staying with him the last few weeks?"

"My future is undecided right now. And I was only visiting Tokiwa-sensei on business," Itsuki said in a clipped tone.

Itsuki felt the blood drain from his body. If Kurasawa had heard this gossip, then it must have

spread everywhere by now. It made sense, after all. He'd spent nearly two weeks at Tokiwa's house. The apprentices were well aware that Tokiwa never allowed strangers on his turf. Tokiwa had treated Itsuki with kindness, though. To those familiar with Tokiwa's previous attitude towards Itsuki, it must have seemed like a dramatic change.

In the days since he'd returned, Itsuki had become the subject of idle gossip once again. He ended the conversation with Kurasawa and crouched in the hallway near his room.

Itsuki felt sick. Maybe it was sleep deprivation, but the air around him seemed to be wavering. When he realized that people were watching him, he forced himself up on his crutches.

"Itsuki? Are you okay?" a voice asked.

Someone lifted him and propped him against the wall. Now he felt even dizzier. He closed his eyes tightly. He opened them again to see Tokiwa standing before him, neatly attired in a suit for mourning and a tie. Tokiwa looked at Itsuki with concern.

"Excuse me," Itsuki finally said.

Tokiwa furrowed his brows in response. He stroked the corners of Itsuki's eyes and spoke softly. "Are you eating enough? Did you sleep at all?"

"I'm fine," Itsuki lied. "Thanks for asking."

It's him again, Itsuki thought, forcing an awkward smile. It was dangerous to be together this way in public. Maybe Tokiwa was concerned about him simply because of the way he'd felt about Itsuki in the past.

Tokiwa looked at Itsuki and sighed.

"Come here a moment," he said, grasping Itsuki's arm.

"Tokiwa-sensei, don't you have business to attend to?" Kasaoka grunted.

"It'll only take five minutes," Tokiwa snapped.

As Kasaoka watched, Tokiwa put his arm around Itsuki and led him into a vacant guest room. Itsuki couldn't bring himself to struggle.

Before Itsuki could open his mouth to speak, his words were cut off by Tokiwa's kiss. It happened too quickly for him to think. Itsuki came to his senses when he heard someone outside the door. Guests had traveled long distances to attend the funeral. Though the room appeared unoccupied, someone could walk in at any moment.

How would Tokiwa act if people saw them together like this? Just thinking about it made Itsuki's blood run cold.

"Stop!" Itsuki hissed, trying to push him away, but Tokiwa ignored him.

Tokiwa wrapped his long arms around Itsuki's waist and pulled him closer, sucking on Itsuki's tongue.

Itsuki's throat twitched as shivers ran down his spine and he helplessly succumbed to the pleasure. He knew he couldn't defeat Tokiwa, but Itsuki couldn't give up without a fight. Tokiwa, however, grabbed his hands and pinned him against the wall. Itsuki thought about scratching him, but didn't have the heart to go through with it. He wriggled in vain in Tokiwa's grasp.

Tokiwa pinned Itsuki's head against the wall and



kissed him deeply. He clutched Itsuki's hips firmly, but the tongue that explored Itsuki's mouth was sweet and gentle by contrast. Itsuki wanted to cry. When Tokiwa finally let him breathe, Itsuki stopped struggling and clutched at Tokiwa's sleeves.

His breath came in little gasps as Tokiwa nibbled his lips, causing his hips to squirm. Tokiwa pressed closer to Itsuki and looked him in the eye.

"Is it true you never slept with Yamabe-sensei?" Tokiwa suddenly asked.

Itsuki blinked in surprise at this unexpected question.

"Is it true?" Tokiwa anxiously repeated.

Itsuki managed to nod, but Tokiwa still looked grim. Tokiwa must have noticed that Itsuki looked scared, because he softened his expression.

"I need to talk to you," he said slowly, stroking Itsuki's cheek. "I'll come to your room tonight. Right now, there's no time."

It was the same tone Tokiwa used when making love. Itsuki felt his skin prickle with goosebumps, but he was unable to nod or even shake his head.

Itsuki.

Tokiwa called his name again. Itsuki nodded vaguely. Tokiwa planted a kiss on his nose, then devoured his mouth again. There was no escape from Tokiwa's passionate kisses.

The fingers that had felt rough a moment ago suddenly turned gentle as Tokiwa stroked Itsuki's cheek. He murmured Itsuki's name in his ear until Itsuki could hear nothing else. Itsuki idly fingered Tokiwa's sleeve,

then balled his hands into fists. He knew if he touched Tokiwa's warmth he would never let go.

Just then, Tokiwa's cellphone rang. Judging by Tokiwa's tone when he answered it, the caller must have been Kasaoka. After a brief conversation, Tokiwa planted a kiss on Itsuki's forehead and quickly left the room. Slumped against the wall, Itsuki was unable to move for a while. Finally, he sat down.

Itsuki looked at his crutches on the carpet and thought of Tokiwa's strong back. The funeral would begin soon, and they probably wouldn't have a chance to talk before then.

There wouldn't be that many guests at the funeral, but Tokiwa would be busy greeting them. This was excellent timing for the plan Itsuki had in mind. When the funeral was over, Itsuki would leave Yamabe's estate for good. He had decided this right after Yamabe had been diagnosed with terminal illness.

The contract was valid only as long as Yamabe lived. Itsuki had already explained this to Kasaoka. He'd leave everything behind and start anew, with no loose ends to worry about.

Only Kasaoka knew Itsuki planned to leave. Itsuki had asked him to keep it a secret, but in reality, no one would miss Yamabe's pet once he was gone. Whatever Tokiwa wanted to discuss with him, it didn't really matter. He was leaving, and that was that.

Itsuki sighed. Just then the door opened, and Itsuki hid himself.

"Nobody's in here," someone said.

"You must have been hallucinating," another

voice said. "Do you really think the two of them would hole up together at a time like this?"

"Hole up?" the first voice echoed. "Nice way of putting it. Tokiwa-sensei is busy with his preparations, and Hashimoto was devoted to Yamabe-sensei until the end, right?"

"His so-called devotion was nothing more than a lot of sitting around," the other man scoffed. "He could at least greet the guests on Yamabe's behalf, but he probably wouldn't know how."

This conversation was so extraordinary that Itsuki found himself holding his breath.

"Well, he does look pretty for a man," the sarcastic voice continued. "Yamabe-sensei and Tokiwa-sensei were both crazy about him. But why did Yamabe keep him here all this time to do nothing? He'll probably mooch off Tokiwa now."

"Maybe you should quit making up stories to amuse yourself," the other voice snorted.

Itsuki realized that the second man was Kurasawa, the apprentice he had spoken to earlier.

This made Itsuki want to stay hidden even more.

"You're being disrespectful to everyone involved. Hashimoto may not even go to work for Tokiwa, he said so himself," Kurasawa went on.

"What's disrespectful about it?" the gossiping apprentice asked. "Everybody knows Hashimoto was Yamabe-sensei's boy-toy."

"That's just idle gossip, man. It's unfair to Hashimoto," Kurasawa pointed out.

"Not really," was the reply. "Kasaoka did the actual work, Hashimoto was just there for show."

"You don't know that for sure," Kurasawa retorted. "If Tokiwa-sensei keeps Hashimoto as his assistant, he probably needs the extra help. I've heard that Hashimoto is a good worker."

"Good at playing innocent, that is," the other apprentice said. "Do you have a thing for him, too? His room was connected to Yamabe-sensei's, you know. He could get to him easier that way. Tokiwa-sensei has his eye on Hashimoto, too. He's probably already slept with him. I've heard the three of them did it together. Makes me sick just talking about it."

"Makes me even sicker to hear it. Are you making up this disgusting stuff because you're mad that Tokiwa's taking over the workshop?" Kurasawa asked in a prickly tone. "I can't listen to this anymore. You're scared to attack Tokiwa-sensei directly, so you talk trash about Hashimoto instead. Are you the one who spread all those rumors about Hashimoto and Yamabe-sensei, sweetie?"

"How dare you speak to me like that!" the other apprentice growled. "Who the hell are you calling sweetie?"

"Sorry," Kurasawa said, not sounding apologetic at all. "I just can't bring myself to say the name of a backstabber who spreads lies about people he barely knows."

"Kurasawa, you jerk!" the man yelled. As the conversation turned into a fight, Itsuki decided it was time to speak up.

"Excuse me, but could you keep it down?" he pleaded.

The apprentices fell silent as Itsuki came into view. The gossiper looked livid when he saw Itsuki lurking in the shadows.

"What the hell? How long have you been sitting there?" the man snapped.

"I felt faint and was resting here a moment," Itsuki said softly. "I heard your entire conversation, but is there anything you want to say to my face?"

The man turned bright red and sped off without a word. Suddenly they heard a voice cry out in pain. Itsuki figured the man must have crashed into someone in the hall.

"Are you okay? Do you need help getting up?" Kurasawa asked anxiously, looking more than a little uncomfortable.

Itsuki smiled bitterly at the young apprentice.

"Thanks, but I'm okay," he said. "You might want to be more careful about who you talk to around here."

The gossiper was one of Yamabe's oldest apprentices. He had begged Yamabe to let him continue at the workshop after his apprenticeship ended, and came and went on a regular basis. Although he received the salary of a regular apprentice, he could be a tiresome foe if you disagreed with him.

"I couldn't believe what he said about you," Kurasawa said honestly, scratching his head. "Sorry you had to hear that. Guess your job will be a lot harder from now on."

"I'll be fine," Itsuki assured him. "Thanks for sticking up for me."

"Sure," Kurasawa said, blinking.

Itsuki smiled at him a little. "I'm grateful that you defended Yamabe and me, but you should probably keep your mouth shut in the future."

"You're not angry about what he said?" Kurasawa asked.

"Does it make any difference?" Itsuki replied frankly. "Gossip is inevitable around here. You'll only encourage him if you let it get to you."

Itsuki sighed as he watched Kurasawa leave the room.

Makes me sick just talking about it.

Suddenly his heart felt heavy. Itsuki took a deep breath and stared up at the ceiling.

From now on, Itsuki Hashimoto won't cause any more trouble for Tokiwa, he thought calmly.

But Itsuki still cared for Tokiwa so much. He loved it when Tokiwa gruffly whispered in his ear. Though the man seemed pushy and aggressive on the surface, Tokiwa truly had a gentle soul.

When Yamabe had ordered Itsuki to visit Tokiwa, Itsuki naturally felt nervous, but also so happy he could have cried. If they met one-on-one, maybe they could finally speak openly. Just being able to speak to Tokiwa would have been enough, but Itsuki never dreamed he'd also be staying at Tokiwa's house.

The 10 days they spent together had been a very special time. Itsuki was happy in that house. He never wanted to forget that time he spent wrapped in that

gentle cocoon. But he'd have to leave Yamabe's place now if he wanted to preserve that memory.

While Itsuki felt grateful for Kurasawa's words, he knew that the other guests saw him only as a decoration. To stay on as Tokiwa's secretary would not be appropriate. Kasaoka would still be around to help, and Tokiwa could certainly hire someone with more experience than Itsuki. That was probably what Tokiwa wanted to talk to him about.

Itsuki had no experience as a sculptor, only as a part-time secretary-trainee. Someone like him would be useless here, but because of his previous contract, he knew they couldn't just fire him. It was up to Itsuki to leave.

Tokiwa probably understood Itsuki's situation quite well. Itsuki's parents were deceased, his family home was gone, and his lack of real work experience would make it difficult to find a new job. Tokiwa must be concerned about Itsuki's future and wanted to discuss these matters in detail.

Itsuki shook his head, trying to chase away his dark thoughts. No matter what Tokiwa expected from him, one thing was dead-certain—Itsuki knew that he cared about Masatsugu Tokiwa.

Even after he joined Yamabe's household, Itsuki's greatest pleasure was seeing Tokiwa's art. With little time to himself, it was difficult to see Tokiwa's works in person, but even looking at photos was enjoyable. Occasionally, he'd catch a brief glimpse of a Tokiwa piece while running errands for Yamabe. That always made him smile.

Itsuki truly loved watching Tokiwa carve his path through life. Tokiwa was a man who confidently faced the future, but there was an unexpected gentleness to his touch. Every time Itsuki looked at Tokiwa's art, he couldn't wait to see what Tokiwa would create next.

Itsuki had been a fan from the very beginning. The fact that they were also friends was completely irrelevant.

Over the years, gossip about Itsuki's relationship with Yamabe had spread widely in the workshop. The apprentices acted polite in public, but slandered Itsuki behind closed doors. Yamabe not only tolerated the gossip, but seemed to find it amusing. Itsuki was forced to grin and bear it when the tales came back to him.

But this was a different case. Itsuki bit his lip, thinking about the conversation he'd just overheard. If Itsuki stayed, he'd have to face that gossip on his own. Worse still, people would be jealous of Tokiwa for inheriting Yamabe's estate. They would suspect the worst of him, and malicious talk would constantly trail behind him.

Such talk could have a negative impact on the reputation of Masatsugu Tokiwa as an artist, and Itsuki definitely didn't want that. Just thinking about it sent chills down his spine. No way could Itsuki let this happen. He couldn't bear to jeopardize Tokiwa's success.

Itsuki Hashimoto was Yasuyuki Yamabe's beloved pet. Now that Yamabe was dead, there was no place for him here. Just as a cat sometimes disappears when it senses its master is dying, a human pet who has

outlived his usefulness has no choice but to leave.

Itsuki sighed and stared at the ceiling again.
Be careful with your leg. Don't push too hard.

He thought about their last conversation. Tokiwa would never touch him that way again. He would never feel Tokiwa's warm lips against his own, or the way Tokiwa pressed his forehead against him. His expression and his voice. The memory of his warm hands as he touched Itsuki.

Itsuki glanced down at his leg, remembering how Tokiwa had touched it a few days ago.

I have to leave, Itsuki thought. But he couldn't help but dream of what might have been.

Why couldn't he let go of this desire to be with Tokiwa? It was always there, right at the back of his mind.

Just then, Itsuki heard more voices outside the door. Looking at his watch, he knew it was time for the funeral service to start. He hurriedly picked up his crutches and managed to stand.

What does he want to talk to me about? Itsuki wondered, feeling a pang of regret. He left the room and headed down the hallway.

Chapter 13

One year later, Itsuki had a part-time job as assistant editor of a local free paper. The office was on the third floor of a building on a street near the train station.

"Ah, Hashimoto! I brought some goodies for you."

Sajima-san, his supervisor and only co-worker, was sitting by the window, casually sipping tea as Itsuki entered the office. The paper was fairly well-known despite its small size, but relied heavily on advertising to cover expenses. Their staff budget was also tight, so Sajima served as editor-in-chief, reporter, and camerawoman. She hired additional help as needed, but the operation was chronically understaffed.

Itsuki had taken the job at the end of the summer. After leaving Yamabe's estate, he had gone back to vocational school for a while, and one of his instructors suggested he try working for Sajima-san. Now he was her semi-regular employee.

"Welcome home. How was your trip?" Itsuki asked politely.

"Perfect, if only it hadn't rained," Sajima said. "Here are your treats, my thank you gift for taking care of things while I was gone. Bring everything home with you, okay?"



"Thanks, but I don't know if I can eat this much, I live by myself, you know," Itsuki said with a wry smile, looking at the four boxes of various sizes.

Sajima-san had just visited her husband's hometown. They had only been married for six months. She had left her keys with Itsuki just in case, but nothing really urgent had come up, fortunately.

"One box is plenty, thanks," Itsuki added. "You should share the rest with your husband."

"Take them all!" Sajima insisted. "The small one is full of sweets, and there are pickles, a ramen set, rice seasonings, and some boiled vegetables. They'll help you with your cooking!"

Suddenly she pulled out a thin magazine.

"This is the best treat, though," she said.

It was a local paper similar to the one they published. The logo on the cover was a play on the name of an area that Itsuki knew well.

At the bottom of the page, the name "Masatsugu Tokiwa" appeared in large, bold letters.

"This paper was at my in-law's house," Sajima confessed. "I remembered that you're a fan of this sculptor, so I brought it home. My husband's sister wrote the article. Amazing she even got an interview, with all his prestige and experience. Luckily, one of her friends introduced them."

She paused to pour a cup of tea for Itsuki, then offered him a sweet.

"She says he's a wonderful man," she went on. "He refused to have his picture taken, so they only published the interview. Thought you might be interested."

"Thanks," Itsuki said.

"You know him, right? What's he like in person? Why isn't he married yet?" Sajima inquired rapidly.

Itsuki blinked in response to her unexpected questions.

"My sister-in-law has a crush on him," she said with amusement. "But she couldn't ask questions about his personal life. You probably don't know about his love life, either."

"Nope, nothing at all," Itsuki lied. "I'm just a fan of his work. Sorry I can't help."

"No problem! It probably wouldn't work out anyway. He's in a league of his own," Sajima said, putting down her empty cup. "I read the article but just couldn't keep track of what he was saying. He's a great man, but I doubt if he'll become a household name anytime soon."

She got up and started clearing away the tea things.

"Back to work," she said, moving toward the tiny kitchen in the corner. Suddenly she stopped, as if something had just occurred to her. "Ooops, I forgot to tell you. Next week, I'm going out of town to research an article. Can you come along and help me out? What's your schedule like?"

She mentioned the name of a seaside town within their prefecture. The article would be about winter foods for an upcoming issue.

"Should be fine," Itsuki said. "I've never been there before, so I'd love to go with you."

"Great!" Sajima exclaimed. "I was worried you

might have something else going on. You won't have to cancel a date, will you?"

"Nope," Itsuki said. "I'm not seeing anyone right now."

"That's something I just can't fathom, Hashimoto," Sajima said seriously, looking up at Itsuki. "Don't take this the wrong way, but you seem sort of detached from the real world. Do people at school ever call you a monk?"

"Not really," Itsuki answered, "because I don't study all that hard. But about the trip, how should I prepare?"

"Just bring your driver's license and we'll be fine," Sajima said. "Get a good night's sleep and eat well beforehand. I don't want you falling asleep on me at a crucial moment."

Itsuki nodded and returned to his desk. He was really grateful for the invitation.

Itsuki had started working for Ms. Sajima not only for the paycheck, but also to have a place where he felt like he belonged, after years of being cut off from society. It didn't surprise Itsuki that Sajima viewed him as being detached. For so many years, he had been.

Itsuki's new life started the spring after he left Yamabe's house.

It took him a while to adapt to the dramatic change. Fortunately, he was able to enroll in an information services program at a vocational school with other students his age. He told people that he'd been working in a different field, but no one seemed very interested.

Itsuki had saved quite a bit of money during his years with Yamabe. His mother had passed away and his sister was now married, so he only had to take care of himself now.

He's in a league of his own.

Sajima's words made Itsuki recall the TV and newspaper reports on Yamabe's memorial. There were scenes from the funeral, along with images of Yamabe's works. That world seemed terribly distant to Itsuki now. It was hard to believe he had spent eight years at Yamabe's side.

If his family's debt had not been dumped on Itsuki, he would have graduated from vocational school and found a good job like a normal person. He would have sent his sister to college and helped his mother with household expenses. The three of them would probably still be living together as a family. If Yamabe hadn't made him that offer, Itsuki would have worked himself to the bone, with creditors breathing down his neck.

But none of these scenarios had come to pass. Itsuki had inhabited a different world, a place with no connections, no relations. And right in the middle of it, Tokiwa had been there.

Itsuki didn't see Tokiwa in any of the TV coverage. Just like Sajima said, Tokiwa didn't like to expose himself to the media.

Itsuki also never heard about what had happened to Yamabe's remains. He could have asked Kasaoka, but what would be the point?

He had heard bits and pieces about Tokiwa, though. Last year, some pieces Tokiwa exhibited abroad

won an award, and his star of fame was rising.

Tokiwa would try anything once, and much of his new work had an experimental feel to it. The piece that Tokiwa had been planning while Itsuki was at his house was now nearly finished. Come fall, it would adorn the grounds of an airport in the Tohoku region. Itsuki had already decided he would go see it.

As Itsuki eagerly tracked Tokiwa's career, he knew he still had a soft spot in his heart for him. But Tokiwa *was* in a league of his own, that much was certain.

"Hey, Itsuki. You're a painter, right?" Sajima called over. "I saw that watercolor you did. Ever consider entering a contest?"

Itsuki was busy with advertising layouts for the next edition and didn't answer right away.

"The local merchants are sponsoring an art contest," Sajima babbled on. "It's their first one, so they haven't received many entries. The deadline's in four days, and you can use any media you want—crayons, watercolor, oil paints..."

"They should ask for entries from the local elementary school," Itsuki commented idly.

"They already did, but got too many crayon drawings," Sajima said. "Some local artists have submitted pieces as well, but now they have too many entries from the same people. At this rate, it'll just be children's drawings. The organizer is going crazy. You should give them that picture you showed me, I'm sure they'd love to have it."

"I don't think so," Itsuki politely refused.

Something about Itsuki's expression told Sajima not to press him on.

Itsuki had drawn the sketch at Tokiwa's house the year before. In his rush to return to Yamabe's, he had left the picture behind. Shortly after Itsuki moved into his apartment, Kasaoka had mailed it to him. On his way to work one day, Itsuki had picked up a mysterious package from the post office. He'd opened it during his break, and had been shocked by what he found inside. Sajima had looked at the painting with awe.

"Wow," she'd said. "I haven't drawn anything since school. I can only draw the moon and the horizon!"

"I don't draw anymore," Itsuki had said quietly, ending the discussion.

After his drawing streak at Tokiwa's house, there had been only a few blank pages left in Itsuki's sketchbook. But he had done nothing to fill these pages since then, and wasn't even sure that he wanted to.

Itsuki enjoyed drawing, but only if he felt truly inspired. He was just as stubborn now as back in high school, and hadn't sketched anything in the past year.

But on his way home that day, Itsuki went into an art supply store and bought a palette, some brushes, and a watercolor set. The magazine that Sajima had given him seemed to have lit a fire in him. According to the interview, Tokiwa was still dedicated to his art, which made Itsuki feel nostalgic for the old days.

He went home and took a shower, and then reached for his sketchbook. Itsuki wanted to finish a picture before he had dinner, or even a cup of tea.

The next day, he submitted his finished painting to the contest under his sister's name. Though there was no reason for her to find out, two days later she called him.

"Uh, sorry I borrowed your name," he apologized.

But his sister just laughed. "It's fine, I don't mind. Did you use my married name or my maiden name?"

"Your maiden name, Ayaka Hashimoto," Itsuki confessed. "I didn't want to use your married name, that's private information."

"Whatever," his sister said. "I'd like to see that picture some time. Have you taken up painting again? That would make me very happy."

"Why?" Itsuki asked with surprise.

"Because I love your paintings, silly! I always loved them when we were young, and I'd love to see them again. If you have time, you could come visit little Yuuta!" his sister said cheerfully.

Over the past year, Itsuki and his sister had repaired their once shaky relationship. Six months ago, his brother-in-law called with the news that his sister had delivered a healthy baby boy, and Itsuki had visited them right away.

Just seeing his sister with her new baby had helped him rekindle their lost ties. For the first time, Itsuki really understood what it had been like for his sister at boarding school, a place they could have never afforded on their own. While she had been there, his sister didn't have to worry about their mother. Suddenly

she had the freedom to attend the college of her choice.

But the price of this freedom had been her brother's confinement at a strange place.

"I know you were trying to help mom and me, but I still hated you for leaving," his sister had admitted. "Why did you have to go to that place and be surrounded by strange men? I loved you and just couldn't understand all that. After Mama died, I kept wondering why everything turned out this way."

So I wasn't the only one with his hands tied, Itsuki thought.

His sister had been angry that she couldn't help, too. Angry with their mother, and angry at herself. No wonder she'd been so depressed.

Itsuki didn't tell anyone else that he'd entered the competition. But two days after the exhibition opened, Sajima found out about Itsuki's entry. When Itsuki showed up for work, she thanked him profusely.

"Hashimoto! Thank you so much for submitting a picture to the contest! You're a life saver!"

"Not at all," Itsuki replied with a laugh. "But my piece looks so drenched with color compared to the other entries."

"Maybe so, but the color and subject matter makes it interesting," Sajima said. "My friends were happy to receive it. By the way, a local TV crew filmed your painting today. Did you see it on the morning news?"

"First time I've heard of it," Itsuki admitted. "I don't have cable at my apartment."

"It was just the local news, but you were

probably at school," Sajima said. "Sorry I didn't record it for you!"

"Don't worry about it. It's just something I was experimenting with," Itsuki said quickly, anxious to change the subject.

"Well, tonight I'll take you to dinner like I promised," Sajima proclaimed.

Unable to refuse her kindness, Itsuki allowed her to take him to a restaurant after work.

"Would you do an illustration for the paper some time?" Sajima proposed, after they had chatted for a while. "You have such a unique use of color. Maybe too intense for the front page, but we could try a small picture to start with. If it gets a positive reaction, we'll give you the cover."

"Thanks but no thanks," Itsuki replied with a smile. "I can't really do that sort of thing. I only paint when I'm in the mood. Sometimes I go for years without painting."

"Really? What a waste. Well, just tell me if you're ever in the mood," Sajima said vaguely.

They parted ways in front of the restaurant. Itsuki walked Sajima to the train, then rode home on his bicycle. It was almost nine, but people were still out and about. Itsuki's studio apartment was 10 minutes away from the station. Most of the other tenants were students who went out partying on weekend nights. Itsuki parked and locked his bike, then climbed the steep staircase to his second floor apartment.

Since it was Friday, Itsuki had no work or school the next day. He planned to go to a museum in

another town. Since he couldn't afford an express train, he would have to take a local train and then transfer.

Itsuki walked toward his apartment, taking his key out of his pocket. Just then he noticed that someone was leaning against his door, staring at the floor. People never visited him without warning. This person must be lost.

Itsuki continued to approach, but stopped after a few more steps.

The person slowly raised his head.

Itsuki instantly knew it was Tokiwa.

Chapter 14

As he bustled about boiling water in his small kitchen, Itsuki glanced into the room beyond. His living quarters were spare and simple, furnished with only a bed and a desk. Everything else was kept in his closet. One of Itsuki's school friends said his apartment looked more like a "model room" than a place where someone actually lived.

Now Tokiwa was standing in the middle of this room. This fact was strange but undeniable.

Itsuki had been the last one to leave Yamabe's funeral. Kurasawa had felt concerned about him and stayed by his side during the service. Itsuki told Kurasawa that he had an errand on the way home, and would get a taxi later. After he left Kurasawa, Itsuki bought some new clothes at the nearest department store and then hailed a taxi.

"Take me to the station, please," Itsuki told the cabbie. He changed in the station restroom, tossing away his suit. Then he went flying out of town on the next bullet train, not bothering to tell Tokiwa or anyone else. He left the cellphone Kasaoka had given him in Yamabe's room.

For the first month, Itsuki lived in a weekly rental and told no one of his whereabouts. When he moved into a permanent apartment and started school,

he resumed contact with a few select people, but not Tokiwa.

So why in the world was the man here now?

Because he seldom entertained, Itsuki had just enough dishes for one person. He poured instant coffee into his only mug and steeled himself to face Tokiwa.

He figured that Tokiwa saw him as nothing more than a past acquaintance. It was unlikely Tokiwa would have any lingering affection for him, not after Itsuki's last vanishing act.

He placed the cup on a tray and returned to where Tokiwa was waiting. Tokiwa stood in front of the window, eyeing Itsuki's room with interest.

This unforgettable man looked the same as before, yet Itsuki sensed something had changed in him. Though it was February, Tokiwa's arms looked tanned. He must have been working outdoors, since his face was tanned as well. It was a look that took some getting used to. His back and shoulders also seemed larger, even more muscular.

"Sorry, I only have instant coffee," Itsuki apologized, putting the mug on his desk.

Tokiwa made no move to pick it up. He silently watched Itsuki before he spoke.

"No need to apologize. It was rude to show up like this. How's your right leg? All better now?"

"It's fine," Itsuki replied. "Took a couple of months, but it was a clean break, and I have no trouble walking now."

"Good. What about school? Did you start classes again?"

Itsuki nodded, unfazed by Tokiwa's question. Tokiwa had managed to find out where he lived. What else did he know about Itsuki's new life?

"Is everything going well? Need help with anything?" Tokiwa continued to ask.

Did he only come here to ask all these irritating questions? Itsuki wondered. He slowly raised his head and looked Tokiwa in the eye.

"Thank you for your concern," he answered. "Everything's fine."

Was this the "talk" that Tokiwa had mentioned before Yamabe's funeral? Tokiwa had been upset when Itsuki disappeared for the second time in their relationship, not even leaving a note behind. When Itsuki hailed that taxi, all he had were the clothes on his back, his wallet, and his address book. Tokiwa must have worried about where Itsuki had gone and how he was surviving.

But Itsuki doubted that Tokiwa's concern was out of love. Tokiwa was just not the sort of person who would forget about someone after they disappeared.

"Sorry for leaving like that," Itsuki said quietly. "I had already decided to leave from the moment Yamabe got sick. I didn't want to make a big fuss about it, so I didn't tell you before I left. Sorry if I made you worry."

Itsuki bowed his head, but Tokiwa said nothing.

"But I'm fine, really," Itsuki continued. "I started school again and I'm trying to make a fresh start."

Itsuki knew that going back to vocational school would not necessarily guarantee his future success. Most

high school graduates struggled to find jobs now, and Itsuki wondered if any companies would hire someone in his late twenties with such limited experience.

Nevertheless, Itsuki had returned to the program he started years before, and reworked his vision for the future. There was no place for Tokiwa in that future.

Itsuki stared at Tokiwa for a moment. Just like his boss said, Tokiwa was in a league of his own. He was like a treasure chest buried deep inside Itsuki's heart, a pleasant memory of a distant time.

"You don't need to worry about me anymore," Itsuki finally said. He sounded calm as he spoke these words, which made him feel better.

"Fine," Tokiwa replied. He sighed and began to move, turning his head to look at Itsuki. "Now let's switch the topic to something more important. I have a favor to ask you. I want you to give me another chance."

Itsuki blinked, looking absolutely stunned.

"I can understand if you're still angry," Tokiwa continued. "But I don't feel like making excuses. Scream at me if you want to, punch me, kick me, get everything out of your system. All I want is a chance to make it up to you."

"Make what up to me?" Itsuki asked, confused.

"I don't mean what happened a year ago," Tokiwa clarified. "I'm talking about what happened nine years ago, when you were a student and I was Yamabe's apprentice. Remember that night I gave you a ride home on my motorcycle?"

There was no way Itsuki could have forgotten.

That was the first time Tokiwa had kissed him, their final meeting before his life changed forever. During his long years with Yamabe, Itsuki often wished that he could return to that golden moment.

But it was too late to change the past. Itsuki bit his lip, trying to block out the painful memories.

The peace and quiet he had fought so hard to achieve felt suddenly torn to shreds. Why was Tokiwa saying this now?

"Tokiwa-sensei, I thought you hated me..." Itsuki said in a far away voice. It was only natural that Tokiwa might despise him. During all those years with Yamabe, they had never spoken to each other, not even to say hello.

"...I didn't want it to be that way," Itsuki continued desperately. "I thought I had no choice in the matter. I didn't think things through like I should have."

Tokiwa furrowed his brows, while Itsuki struggled to go on.

"They called me Yamabe's prostitute. But the fact of the matter was, I could do nothing without Yamabe's permission. I was ashamed for you to see me that way. It hurt my pride. I felt so weak..."

"Yes, I know. And you're right, I was angry," Tokiwa admitted. "But you stopped returning calls, dropped out of school, vanished from your home. What was I supposed to think? I figured something bad had happened and started searching for you. I found out about your mother and her debt, then the trail went cold. But I still hoped you'd call me someday."

Tokiwa leaned against the desk and stared at Itsuki.

"Finally I found you, but you wouldn't speak to me," Tokiwa sadly remembered. "When I went to the workshop, they told me that you were Yamabe-sensei's lover, but now I know that Sensei had you wrapped around his little finger. He was always very possessive of the things he loved."

Itsuki gasped as Tokiwa continued.

"To tell you the truth, I was shocked. At Yamabe, for treating you like an object, and at you, for putting up with it. You even gave up painting! And you spoke so mechanically you sounded like a robot. You just didn't seem like Itsuki to me."

Itsuki hung his head in shame, unable to reply to Tokiwa's harsh words. He stared at Tokiwa's long legs and wondered about the real reason behind his visit.

"When you came to my house, I finally realized I'd been wrong about you," Tokiwa said softly. "You seemed like a robot at first, until I saw you looking at the garden."

Itsuki looked up and met Tokiwa's gaze. His body stiffened as Tokiwa went on.

"You could have never acted liked that at Yamabe's place. After I saw you fall into the river, I knew that you were still Itsuki underneath it all. I simply couldn't send you back to Yamabe's after that. I thought if you were away from him long enough, you might return to your true self."

Tokiwa took a deep breath.

"At first, I just felt angry. I was shocked by Sensei's letter, but you seemed totally indifferent to your fate. I thought you were incapable of being anything

more than a pretty doll."

Tokiwa's words pierced Itsuki's heart time after time. He clenched his fists, but still couldn't look away.

"You even took my abuse, though the real Itsuki started to shine through a little. If you had really been a robot without a soul, you would have let me do as I pleased without a struggle."

Suddenly Tokiwa smiled a little, remembering those passionate nights together.

"By day, you acted like an android, but at night, you became the Itsuki I once knew. I wanted to touch you, bring you back to yourself. When I cut your hair, you looked even more like the old Itsuki. I no longer had the heart to force you to have sex."

Tokiwa had tried so hard to bring him back—leaving the art book where Itsuki would find it, cutting his hair against his will, bringing Itsuki along to assist with the kindergarten project.

When Itsuki started drawing again, Tokiwa's efforts were rewarded.

"I don't expect you to forgive me," Tokiwa said bluntly. "I forced you to do many things against your will. That last day in particular, I was horrible to you. I'm really sorry, Itsuki."

As Tokiwa sadly bowed his head, Itsuki felt as if his heart was being crushed.

"Tokiwa..." Itsuki murmured.

"I'm not foolish enough to think you'll ever forgive me," Tokiwa said. "I just want you to know where I'm coming from."

"O-kay..." Itsuki stammered.

"That time Yamabe-sensei called, you spoke to him like the old Itsuki, instead of like a robot. That made me angry. I couldn't forgive you for wanting to go back to him," Tokiwa frankly confessed. "I didn't want to let you go, no matter what. I loved you so much."

"You...loved me?" Itsuki gasped.

"Why else would I go to all this trouble to find you again?" Tokiwa pointed out. "I've loved you for the last nine years, and I never gave up hope that we'd meet again someday. I tried to forget about you, but I couldn't. I wanted to tell you after the funeral that I still wanted you by my side."

Itsuki sat in stunned silence.

"All I want is another chance to be with you," Tokiwa pleaded. "If things don't work out between us, we can go our separate ways. I'll promise to leave you alone." He smiled bitterly and shook his head. "Please consider it. We can start as friends and take things slowly. I won't force the impossible, but I am pretty stubborn. It's just the way I am, I can't help it."

Itsuki had seen that feverish look in Tokiwa's eyes before. Suddenly Itsuki felt feverish, too. Tokiwa still loved him, in spite of everything.

When they first met, Itsuki was in vocational school and Tokiwa was an apprentice who dreamed of becoming a master sculptor. Now Tokiwa had fulfilled his potential and become a star.

A chance for us to start over.

But that's just not possible.

The answer came to Itsuki with blinding clarity. Itsuki was happy as he was, a humble student with no

real social status. Once he graduated, he'd be a plain old office worker.

Tokiwa, on the other hand, was constantly in the public eye. His life had changed so much since they first met. If Itsuki returned to Tokiwa's side, he would only get in Tokiwa's way.

Maybe people would view him just as Tokiwa's "friend," but the reality was, Itsuki Hashimoto was far too well-known for this to work. Every time the apprentices saw them together, it would conjure up memories of Itsuki's relationship with Yamabe. If Tokiwa started hanging out with Yamabe's former boy-toy, there would be a raging torrent of gossip.

"I- I can't," Itsuki whispered. He took a deep breath and gathered his courage. "Sorry, but I'm in love with someone else. I don't really care to remember those days."

Tokiwa had gone to a place beyond his reach. No matter what had happened between them in the past, it was over now. If Itsuki could have changed anything, he would have left Yamabe after the first six years. And he wouldn't have been in such a rush to leave Tokiwa during their 10 beautiful days together.

Those 10 days away from Yamabe had been anything but ordinary. Itsuki wanted to keep the memory pristine.

Tokiwa looked at him piercingly.

"What's his name?" he asked gently.

"Who?" Itsuki asked back.

"The person you love. What's his name? Where does he live, what does he do for a living?" Tokiwa asked.

"Tokiwa, that's none of your business," Itsuki grimaced.

"I beg to differ," Tokiwa scoffed. "Why won't you tell me? Does this person really exist?"

"Of course he does!" Itsuki insisted. But his voice rang false, even to himself. He composed himself and spoke more softly. "I can't tell you, but I love him a great deal. He's the only person I can think about now, and forever."

Itsuki's head was buzzing, but he forced himself to continue.

"Please go home, and don't come back. I have nothing more to say to you." As he spoke, Itsuki felt himself growing mysteriously calm.

Tokiwa observed Itsuki in silence, then sighed. It sounded painfully loud to Itsuki's ears.

"Fine. Sorry to barge in on you like this," Tokiwa snapped, heading for the door.

Itsuki felt paralyzed, unable to watch as Tokiwa walked out.

The sound of the door closing was deafening to Itsuki. The sudden silence seemed unnatural as he slumped on the cold floor.

Sorry to barge in on you like this.

Tokiwa's voice was still there, even after Itsuki covered his ears with his hands. Nothing could drown it out.

After the funeral, Itsuki figured he'd never see Tokiwa again, though he secretly hoped their paths would cross someday. Years later, even decades later, they would stumble into each other, smile and say hello.

Tokiwa would recognize Itsuki and stop to talk to him.

But now that "someday" would never happen. Itsuki had pulled the curtains shut and ended the show. If they ever met again, Tokiwa wouldn't even speak to him.

Will I ever forget him? Will he fade into just another memory?

Funny thing was, Itsuki knew in his heart that Tokiwa would never forget him. Just thinking about that made him feel a little better, for Itsuki really wanted Tokiwa to remember him.

Tokiwa's surprise visit had turned Itsuki's world upside down. His vision was shaky and blurry, flooded with color. The knowledge that he would never see Tokiwa again fell in his chest with a thud.

Never again.

Suddenly, it all hit home. He stumbled toward the door and slipped on some shoes. Just as he grabbed the doorknob, someone opened the door from outside.

"Huh?!"

There stood Tokiwa in the hallway, gazing at wide-eyed Itsuki.

"Ituki?" Tokiwa said softly.

Itsuki instantly knew Tokiwa had not called his bluff.

"I'm s-sorry, forgive me," he said in a shaky voice.

Tokiwa peered at his face. "Ituki," he whispered again.

Itsuki melted. It had been one whole year since anyone had said his name like that.

Tokiwa cradled Itsuki's face in his cold hands, then took away Itsuki's breath with a passionate kiss. He slipped his tongue between Itsuki's lips and sucked on his tongue. He kissed Itsuki deeply and forcefully, pulling Itsuki's body close.

Itsuki shivered with pleasure. The familiar scent of Tokiwa's cigarettes overwhelmed him, and he surrendered to his feelings of desire. He knew it was impossible for them to be together, but Itsuki could no longer resist. He clung to Tokiwa's shirt, completely unable to let go.

"Itsuki," Tokiwa said. "I'll ask you again. What is the name of the man you love?"

Itsuki moaned. Tokiwa's voice made him shiver. He held his breath as Tokiwa lifted his face and repeated the question. There was nowhere to hide when Tokiwa was this close, looking into his eyes. No matter where Itsuki went, Tokiwa would find him again. Itsuki gulped and bit his lip.

"Tokiwa," he finally whispered.

Tokiwa stroked Itsuki's face and passionately kissed him again and again. As their eyes met between kisses, Itsuki kept apologizing.

"Don't be foolish, no need to apologize," Tokiwa said.

Then he pressed Itsuki against the wall and stroked his back. Itsuki moaned as Tokiwa's lips covered his own, as Tokiwa's tongue probed his mouth and sucked his tongue.

Tokiwa kissed Itsuki's eyelids, as if to make Itsuki's blurred vision clear again. The tingling sensation

lit a fire at the base of Itsuki's spine. Itsuki no longer wanted to run away. After another long kiss, Tokiwa carried him to the bed. A moment later, Tokiwa was on top of him.

Itsuki trembled, remembering what happened the last night at Tokiwa's house. Sensing his apprehension, Tokiwa gave him a gentle look.

"Is there no way this can work?" Tokiwa asked softly.

For a moment, Itsuki was unable to speak, distracted by memories floating across his mind. As Tokiwa kissed him again, the world seemed to fade away around them.

"Relax, I won't hurt you," Tokiwa whispered, nibbling on an ear. He had begun stimulating Itsuki's most sensitive place, making Itsuki squirm with pleasure. Tokiwa's lips moved from ears to neck to chest, driving Itsuki crazy with desire. Itsuki felt dizzy with pleasure. He clutched at the blankets.

"You fool. You should be holding *me* instead," Tokiwa teased. He put Itsuki's hands behind his neck and kissed him fiercely. Between kisses, Tokiwa called his name again and again until Itsuki was almost in tears. Tokiwa's behavior during those 10 days had been so one-sided by comparison. Itsuki had just assumed that he wasn't allowed to touch Tokiwa in the way that Tokiwa touched him.

Itsuki stroked Tokiwa's shoulders for the first time, acting of his own free will. They felt thick and strong as he caressed them through Tokiwa's shirt.

Now Itsuki desperately wanted to feel Tokiwa's

most private part, and slid his hand down Tokiwa's pants. Tokiwa grew still, his teeth buried in Itsuki's neck. Itsuki saw Tokiwa looking at him in amazement, but he was too busy fondling him to care. With his other hand, Itsuki traced the curve of Tokiwa's shoulder blade and the line of his neck. Tokiwa's skin felt as smooth as leather.

Itsuki suddenly realized that he loved touching Tokiwa this way. Propped on his elbows above him, Tokiwa watched him with a wry smile, and then moved in for a kiss. Just as he was about to pull away, Itsuki grasped his neck and pulled him closer. The tips of their tongues swirled together.

Tokiwa.

Itsuki called out the name to make sure that he was really there, that this wasn't just a dream.

He moved his hand down Tokiwa's cheek, felt the stubble on his chin. He was touching Tokiwa all over now—and he never wanted to stop.

Tokiwa took Itsuki's hand and kissed the spaces between his fingers. The sensual feeling made Itsuki tremble all over. He buried his hands in Tokiwa's silky hair. Tokiwa let Itsuki do as he pleased for a while, then began to move again.

Tokiwa stroked Itsuki's skin with a gentle, precise touch, then showered Itsuki's ears with tender kisses. Itsuki moaned and melted with pleasure as Tokiwa rubbed him all over. Itsuki arched his back as his penis stood to attention.

He was naked now, but he couldn't remember when that happened. His bare skin felt unusually cool



to the touch. Tokiwa caressed his shoulders, stoking the flames of passion.

Every time Tokiwa touched a new place on his body, Itsuki's skin erupted in goosebumps. Tokiwa noticed and slowed down, moving his hands across a larger area. While Itsuki panted for breath, Tokiwa kissed his chin.

"Ahhh..."

Itsuki felt like he might pass out as Tokiwa probed his most sensitive spot. He clenched his teeth, overwhelmed by the sensation.

Itsuki.

Tokiwa's eyes bored into him, while Itsuki hips quivered. As Tokiwa quickened the pace, Itsuki dug his nails into Tokiwa's shoulders.

Itsuki.

Tokiwa kissed him again and again, then pushed up Itsuki's knees. Lying on his side, Itsuki saw Tokiwa's head dive between his legs.

"Stop," he begged, grabbing Tokiwa's hair.

"Why?" Tokiwa asked, obeying for a moment.

Just feeling Tokiwa's breath against his thighs was enough to make Itsuki squirm.

"No-please-stop!" Itsuki begged again.

"Relax and enjoy yourself," Tokiwa urged, ignoring Itsuki's pleas.

His long fingers and relentless kisses brought Itsuki to a fevered pitch. Tokiwa grasped his hips and pulled him closer still. Itsuki remembered this pleasure from before, but the feeling was still a bit too intense.

Tokiwa called out Itsuki's name again. He had

been working between Itsuki's legs for so long that Itsuki felt faint. Though Tokiwa's body looked dim and blurry, Itsuki could still clearly see his face.

Tokiwa finally emerged from his position and kissed Itsuki's neck.

"Just relax," he urged, wrapping Itsuki's arms around his back.

As their bodies pressed close together, Tokiwa entered him. Itsuki moaned as the heat penetrated him, hot enough to almost burn him inside.

"Itsuki," Tokiwa whispered. "Are you all right?"

Itsuki nodded, and Tokiwa kissed him deeply. He could arouse Itsuki simply by repeating his name. As Tokiwa began thrusting inside him, Itsuki tightly held the man he thought he'd never see again.

Just being able to touch Tokiwa made Itsuki so happy he could cry.

The next morning, Itsuki woke up alone.

Was that all a dream? he wondered.

He sat in a daze for a moment, savoring the memory, then heard a sound at the door.

Suddenly Tokiwa appeared. He looked at Itsuki and raised his eyebrows. "So you're finally awake, huh? Are you getting up?"

"Tokiwa-sensei?"

"Stop calling me sensei! It gets on my nerves," Tokiwa playfully reminded Itsuki. He placed his cold hand on Itsuki's forehead. "You feel a little feverish.

Sorry I pushed you so hard."

Itsuki felt like he was dreaming again, but Tokiwa looked at him with concern.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I...I thought it was all a dream," Itsuki stammered. "It was too perfect, having you here with me."

"Silly boy," Tokiwa laughed, kissing Itsuki again. As he darted his tongue into Itsuki's mouth, Itsuki twitched with surprise. Tokiwa drew him closer and feasted on his lips for a long time.

"Not many good shops in the neighborhood, huh?" Tokiwa finally said. "I don't really know this area. Stay put for a minute."

He disappeared into the kitchen. It was almost nine. Itsuki felt a little uneasy having another person in his dreary apartment. He slithered off his bed and peeped into the kitchen, worried that Tokiwa might disappear if he didn't keep an eye on him.

Tokiwa cooked breakfast with the ease of a chef, then followed Itsuki back into his room. Food was piled up on mismatched plates, and Itsuki remembered the same flavors he'd first tasted at Tokiwa's house.

Itsuki's body felt heavy and sore, but he wanted to look at Tokiwa more than anything else. He watched Tokiwa clean up the kitchen, before Tokiwa forcefully pulled him back to bed.

"If you keep stumbling around like that, it'll be last night all over again," Tokiwa said with a frown. He moved the desk chair next to the bed and sat down.

Tokiwa's closeness put Itsuki at ease. As

Tokiwa's cool hand stroked his brow, Itsuki relaxed completely, gently covering Tokiwa's other hand with his own. Tokiwa smiled and bent forward, bringing his face close.

Itsuki closed his eyes as Tokiwa kissed him. Tokiwa sucked on his lower lip, then kissed his cheeks, his temples, his nose, and the corners of his eyes. After another long kiss on the lips, Itsuki finally worked up the nerve to ask Tokiwa how he'd finally found him. He'd been wondering about it since last night.

"It wasn't really that hard to figure out," Tokiwa said. "You were in contact with Kasaoka, right?"

When Itsuki heard the name of his former supervisor, he completely understood.

Kasaoka had told Itsuki to call him after things settled down. Itsuki gave Kasaoka his contact information because he felt he could trust him. Kasaoka didn't call him much, but they kept in touch through email.

He was one of the few people who knew the truth about Itsuki, and expressed a friendly concern for his welfare. Since he was some years older, Kasaoka reminded Itsuki of how his father might have been had he lived.

But why would a tight-lipped person like Kasaoka give his personal information to Tokiwa?

"Don't blame Kasaoka," Tokiwa said. "If it wasn't for him, you'd probably still be in confinement."

"Confinement?" Itsuki echoed.

"After the funeral, when I realized you'd disappeared, I wanted to find you and bring you back,"

Tokiwa explained. "I even planned to hire a detective, but Kasaoka stopped me. He said that would be even worse than the way Yamabe had treated you."

Yamabe had paid Itsuki for his services, an arrangement clearly laid out in a contract. Since the arrangement had been mutual, Kasaoka had given it his full blessing. But the situation had become different. Itsuki had had the right to disappear after Yamabe's death. Kasaoka felt that filing a missing person report, as Tokiwa wanted to do, would be disrespecting Itsuki's own decision.

"So it was Kasaoka, then?" Itsuki wanted to know.

"Kasaoka explained that you had decided to leave on your own," Tokiwa said. "He said I had absolutely no call to interfere."

Tokiwa looked pensively at Itsuki before he went on.

"I figured you'd contact me yourself. When that didn't happen, I realized it was all my fault. I begged Kasaoka to tell me where you were and what you were doing. He told me that if I followed you against your will, he would urge you to report me as a stalker."

Itsuki was at a total loss for words. As far as Itsuki knew, Kasaoka was a mild-mannered man with a gentle way of speaking. He was meticulous when it came to his job, but never spoke as bluntly as Tokiwa described. Itsuki must have looked doubtful because Tokiwa laughed at his expression.

"I'm not Kasaoka's employer," Tokiwa said. "We don't have a worker-boss relationship, so he can

tell it to me straight. And he was right, if I chased you down, there might have been trouble. It was better to just wait."

"You were waiting?" Itsuki asked.

"I recently saw a wonderful picture on the news," Tokiwa said. "I knew right away that you had painted it."

That must have been what Sajima was talking about. What an incredible coincidence that Tokiwa would have seen just those few seconds of footage.

"Yesterday, I invited Kasaoka along to see your painting," Tokiwa continued. "After that, he told me it was okay if I saw you just once, so I came here right away."

"Huh?" Itsuki asked.

"I needed to find out what you were really thinking," Tokiwa clarified.

"What I was thinking?" Itsuki echoed.

"Kasaoka sent you that sketchbook, remember? It didn't take long for him to realize that the painting was yours. He also noticed my hand in the picture."

Itsuki felt himself blush as Tokiwa spoke. The painting he had entered in the contest was of the totem pole from long ago. Itsuki had painted it from memory. After he finished, he realized something was missing, and added a large, suntanned hand.

It was Tokiwa's hand. Itsuki had studied those hands back when they were friends, and again years later at Tokiwa's house. He could remember them with great detail, and had no trouble depicting them.

The day before yesterday, Itsuki himself had

gone to the exhibit. In the middle of the brightly colored landscapes and portraits, the gentle hues of his painting stood out dramatically.

It was a peculiar idea for a painting that probably wouldn't mean much to an outsider. But Itsuki had submitted the picture for a reason, never dreaming that Tokiwa would ever see it.

Tokiwa knew Itsuki only painted the things that he truly cared about. This was particularly true when it came to portraits. Itsuki only painted people who were special to him. Tokiwa had interpreted the painting as a sign, and then begged Kasaoka's "permission" to visit Itsuki.

Tokiwa now looked serious as he spoke in a low voice.

"I won't try to talk you into coming back right now. But once you've finished school, I hope you'll consider it. Trust me, you won't be confined like before. If you want to look for a job, I'll help you however I can. No need to rush, but please think it over."

"I...I can't!" Itsuki said without thinking. "It's impossible. It's better if we just meet like this, when it's convenient for you. I don't want to bug you, or get in your way, or..."

Taking a deep breath, Itsuki felt the familiar pain in his chest. Now that he had touched Tokiwa again, he never wanted to let him go. He realized this on an even deeper level now.

Itsuki still wanted to be by Tokiwa's side, but they had to be careful. He would have to do his best to stay out of the public eye. Just a whiff of nasty gossip

could damage Tokiwa's career.

Tokiwa suddenly looked troubled. He got up from the chair and sat down on the bed, and then drew Itsuki closer and looked into his eyes.

"What do you mean "when it's convenient for me"?" he demanded. "And why do you think you'd bug me?"

"You should know already. When I worked for Yamabe, I was his pet, his plaything." Itsuki sounded calm, but the words were painful to him. "If you kept me around like that, I'd be bound to get in your way."

Itsuki suddenly felt a little bit relieved, but he still couldn't turn back the clock. He couldn't go back nine years, when he'd accepted Yamabe's offer.

"We don't have to go back to Yamabe's workshop," Tokiwa said. "And it's not like you could go back there, even if you wanted to."

"Huh?" Itsuki said with surprise.

Tokiwa smiled. "Since Yamabe was my teacher, it was my duty to handle his funeral arrangements, but I gave up his estate. His assets were divided between his distant relatives, the house was put up for sale, and the workshop was torn down. Now it's just residential land. The apprentices all transferred to different workshops."

Itsuki silently stared at the floor.

"Kasaoka-san now works at a place completely unconnected to Yamabe. You didn't know about that?" Tokiwa asked in a soothing tone.

Itsuki shook his head.

Tokiwa went on. "I learned about the circumstances that led to your employment with

Yamabe, and the contract you made with him. Those rumors I'd heard about you were totally false."

These unexpected words made Itsuki's head snap up.

"Yamabe explained it all to me," Tokiwa confessed. "I told him I didn't care about his estate, I just cared about you, and I asked if he'd be willing to let you go."

Tokiwa reached out to stroke Itsuki's cheek. "Yamabe laughed at me. He said he was fond of you, but that you really weren't his to give. What happened next was up to you, and he had no intention of meddling in your future. He said you were like a son to him, and he'd never behaved inappropriately with you. He also scolded me for believing idle gossip."

Itsuki remembered his last conversation with Yamabe, right before the old man died. Yamabe had been too weak to get out of bed, and sometimes stared at Itsuki in an unsettling way. When Itsuki asked if something was wrong, Yamabe shook his head.

"I've interfered with your life for too long," Yamabe told him.

Itsuki asked him to explain, but Yamabe refused to say anything more. At that time, Itsuki wondered if the old man was referring to his relationship with Tokiwa.

Tokiwa tenderly cradled Itsuki's cheek again. "I've spent a lot of time thinking and finally realized something. Maybe your confusion when we were together was due to your lack of sexual experience." He suddenly looked ashamed. "I'm sorry. I behaved horribly," he said in a low voice.

"What?" Itsuki gasped.

"I thought you were resisting me because you wanted to be with Yamabe," Tokiwa admitted. "But when you kept blushing, I should have realized it was your first time. I feel awful that I never put two and two together."

Itsuki sat in silence as Tokiwa stroked his hair and continued to speak.

"Before the funeral, I told you we needed to talk, but then you just disappeared."

"I know. I'm sorry," Itsuki whispered.

"It's okay," Tokiwa replied. "Kasaoka seems to think that when you disappeared, that *was* your response to me. I really couldn't blame you. I acted like a real jerk to you sometimes. But I still couldn't give you up, and Kasaoka began keeping tabs on me."

"Surveillance?" Itsuki asked.

"He kept checking up on me, to see if I did anything stupid," Tokiwa said, looking a little embarrassed. "But I don't want a pet or a plaything. I don't want a secret lover, but a partner to share my life with. A year ago, you stayed at my house. Will you move in with me forever?"

Itsuki held his breath as Tokiwa said the words he never imagined he would hear. He opened his eyes wide and stared at Tokiwa in disbelief.

"It's not as big as Yamabe's place, and there's no housekeeper," Tokiwa sighed. "Shopping's a little tough, way out in the country, but there's beautiful scenery, clean air, and fresh seafood. All in all, it's not such a bad place to live."

Itsuki wasn't sure how to respond. He wanted to accept Tokiwa's offer right off the bat, but for some reason he was unable to nod his head.

He was still worried about getting in Tokiwa's way.

"Does my invitation bother you because it reminds you of your deal with Yamabe?" Tokiwa asked pointedly.

Tokiwa had seen right through him, but Itsuki shook his head.

"It's just..." Itsuki trailed off.

"I've always liked men," Tokiwa said bluntly. "People gossip about me for being gay, but I don't care. I have no intention of being alone simply to avoid gossip." He paused to kiss the tip of Itsuki's nose. "I don't make a habit of broadcasting my sexual preference, but I have no desire to hide, either. I've always lived my life this way, and I intend to continue. If it becomes too much of a problem, I'll leave the country. I can work anywhere."

Itsuki frowned.

"But in that case I'd bring you with me," Tokiwa assured him. "All I want is to be with you." He traced the bottom of Itsuki's lip with his finger. "I'm not trying to rush you. Just let me know between now and graduation, all right?"

"Tokiwa..."

"It's your choice entirely, Itsuki. Take as much time as you need."

Snuggled in Tokiwa's arms, Itsuki looked up at him. Tokiwa would never say this sort of thing without thoroughly thinking it over. He just wasn't that frivolous.

Itsuki decided it would be rude to reply too soon.

"I need to think it over," he finally replied.

Tokiwa smiled and started kissing him again.

Itsuki sighed. Just being with Tokiwa made him happy. Nine years later, he still loved looking at this man's face.

Itsuki hoped he could look at Tokiwa forever.

"By the way, are you busy next weekend?" Tokiwa suddenly inquired.

"No," Itsuki replied. "I don't have classes, and it's been so quiet around the paper, my boss hasn't needed me to come in."

"Good," Tokiwa replied. "Let's take a trip."

Itsuki looked up in surprise.

"You were planning to go to the museum, right? Why not go together?" Tokiwa suggested, pointing to a paper on Itsuki's desk. Itsuki felt himself blush.

It was a map of the museum that Itsuki wanted to visit. On the list of permanent exhibits, Tokiwa's name had been underlined. Tokiwa must have seen the map yesterday.

Now he sees right through me, Itsuki thought, feeling even more embarrassed.

"But, Tokiwa-sensei!" he cried out. "Uh, I mean, Tokiwa. Don't you have work to do? That museum's so far from here."

Tokiwa quickly silenced his protests. "Don't worry about it. I'm taking a break from work right now. I'm booked at a hotel near the station until next weekend. We can drive to the museum and spend the night there."

"You made reservations at a hotel?!" Itsuki exclaimed.

"I had no intention of going home until I found you and cleared the air. I'm a stubborn bastard, remember?" Tokiwa said.

"But don't you need to go back to your workshop?" Itsuki protested.

"Don't think you can get rid of me so easily," Tokiwa chuckled. "I've spent nine years waiting for you. Another 10 days means nothing to me."

Tokiwa almost sounded like he was bragging, and Itsuki stared at him. Looking a little embarrassed, Tokiwa cuddled Itsuki in his arms and rocked him like a baby. Itsuki reached out to stroke Tokiwa's shoulder.

It's your choice entirely, Itsuki. Take as much time as you need.

Tokiwa respected Itsuki's free will, but he seemed to be looking forward to the future, which pleased Itsuki.

The year before, Itsuki had spent 10 days locked in a "cage" at Tokiwa's house. At that time, Itsuki had been living a doll's life with Yamabe.

Now that Itsuki was finally free, Tokiwa's home seemed like a comfortable cage, one that Itsuki could leave any time he wanted.

He had one year to give Tokiwa an answer.

Gentle Color



Gentle Color

The last bullet train of the night pulled into the station. Hearing the roar of the train from above, Masatsugu Tokiwa breathed a sigh of relief. He was on time. He approached the ticket gate at a brisk pace.

It was the middle of March, but the evenings were still fairly cold. All of the people in the station wore overcoats. Tokiwa smirked when he noticed his overcoat was thicker than all the others.

The area around Tokiwa's house was a few degrees colder than the station, due to the high altitude. Normally he'd wear a lighter coat, but in his haste he'd grabbed something he usually wore in the garden.

Just as Tokiwa was about to light a cigarette, a wave of people poured out from behind the gates—salarymen, tourists, housewives back from shopping in the city. Finally, Tokiwa spotted a familiar figure.

Itsuki burst into a grin when he saw Tokiwa standing by the wall. Before Tokiwa had time to wave, his beloved rushed over, carrying a small suitcase.

"Thanks for coming to meet me," Itsuki greeted.

"No problem. Were you cold on the train?" Tokiwa asked, jamming both hands into his pockets. He had an intense desire to embrace Itsuki, but this was a public place, after all. It had been only 10 days

since they saw each other, but Tokiwa had missed Itsuki terribly.

"I'm fine. It was warm," Itsuki said with a smile. His overcoat was much lighter than Tokiwa's.

I'll lend him a heavier coat when we get home, Tokiwa thought, picking up Itsuki's suitcase.

"Well! Shall we go home then?" he asked happily.

Last month had marked a year since their reunion at Itsuki's house. They had met almost every weekend since then, but last week Itsuki had been busy.

"My boss needs me to research an article with her. She's giving me some time off during spring break, so I can't really say no to her," Itsuki had explained.

Since Itsuki planned to spend his entire spring break at Tokiwa's house, Tokiwa couldn't complain too much. Even if he did, Itsuki would stand his own ground.

Itsuki did have a tendency to put other people before himself, but when Tokiwa tried to argue, it was clear that Itsuki had already made up his mind. He was a gentle person, but definitely not a pushover. This was particularly true when it came to his painting.

"Just quit school and move in with me," Tokiwa had joked around at one point.

Itsuki gave him a troubled look. "Sorry, but I can't. I want to finish and get a job after graduation. If I quit now, I'd have to rely on you to support me. I really don't want that."

Tokiwa suddenly remembered something Kasaoka had told him. Itsuki didn't move in with Yamabe because he wanted to be a kept man. He took the job in order to prove himself.

"Yamabe spoiled him rotten, but Itsuki never acted like a spoiled brat," Kasaoka had said. "He always worked hard and tried to be the best that he could be."

A year ago, Tokiwa had called Itsuki "arm candy," but Kasaoka had definitely set him straight about that. In fact, Itsuki had turned out to be an excellent personal assistant, sometimes even better than Kasaoka.

Tokiwa knew that once Itsuki made up his mind, he could not be budged easily. He had chosen to work for Yamabe of his own free will, and worked hard to do his best until the bitter end.

Tokiwa learned not to grumble, and simply asked Itsuki to keep his weekends open so they could see each other. Itsuki explained that when it came to honoring a prior commitment, he wouldn't change his mind. But he still sometimes worried about interfering with Tokiwa's work.

Tokiwa could hardly believe that Itsuki was with him now. Sometimes, Tokiwa would even touch Itsuki's skin to make sure he was really there. Now, as he watched his beloved standing in his hall, surveying his surroundings, the reality of Itsuki's presence sunk in.

He's really here.

"What's so interesting?" Tokiwa asked.

Itsuki was staring at the walls and ceiling. He had done the same thing on his last visit, studying the interior of the house with interest.

"One can see your artistic style inside this house," Itsuki observed.

"What makes you say that?" Tokiwa asked.

Itsuki was referring to the planes and angles unique to Tokiwa's sculptures. When Tokiwa worked on a piece, he used these lines intentionally to produce an effect. Even though the house was not one of Tokiwa's sculptures, Itsuki's observation was eerily accurate.

"It's hard to explain. The lines between the wall and ceiling, the floor," Itsuki said, looking down the hall again. "The shape of the doors, the way the lights are connected, everything reminds me of your sculptures. Remember that monument you helped build near the station?"

It was something Tokiwa had helped with three years ago, at the station half an hour away from his house. Itsuki had gone to see it last year.

"The lines in your house resemble the lines in that piece," Itsuki commented, "but maybe I'm just imagining it."

"No, you're quite observant," Tokiwa said. "I was very particular, from materials to blueprints, when I remodeled this house."

Tokiwa placed his hands on Itsuki's shoulders and steered him into the living room, impressed by his lover's remark.

Once Tokiwa had found this property, he'd worked hard to create an environment that felt good to him. He'd stayed close to the architect and builders, making sure the finished product was exactly as he planned. Tokiwa wanted the house to have the same

characteristics as his art, so he picked out all of the lumber personally.

Needless to say, everyone was relieved when the project was finally finished. No one knew that Tokiwa had played such a major role in the process. In fact, his other friends never even seemed to notice that his house was so special. Itsuki was the first one.

"I was working on the monument and the house at the same time," Tokiwa told Itsuki.

"I knew it." Itsuki grinned, shedding his coat and sitting on the sofa. "It turned out great, didn't it? It has those clean, soft lines that are still straight and pure. I don't know much about architecture, but this house makes me feel relaxed."

Tokiwa smiled wryly, pouring him a cup of tea.

"That's the first time I've ever heard that," he admitted. "People usually say it feels too quiet and lonely, maybe because it's so sparsely furnished."

Tokiwa hated clutter, and kept the furnishings to a minimum. The living room only held a sofa, a coffee table, and a television hanging on the wall. His workshop was the only exception—a happy, creative mess.

"Really? But I love this house," Itsuki insisted, holding his tea cup with both hands. "It feels so safe here. I always thought it would be a nice place to live, from the first time I visited."

Tokiwa sat down next to him. "Even when I kept you here against your will?"

"Well, that's a separate issue altogether. Uh, Tokiwa, I...I..." Itsuki mumbled, struggling for words.

Tokiwa took the teacup from Itsuki's hands,

then moved in for a kiss. Once Tokiwa touched him, Itsuki was unable to resist. Tokiwa pushed him onto the sofa and kissed him again.

No matter how much Tokiwa touched him, Itsuki always wanted more. Though Itsuki had been passive at first, now the atmosphere was different. Itsuki could look straight into Tokiwa's eyes, hold Tokiwa close with his own hands.

"What do you want for dinner?" Tokiwa asked after a long kiss. Itsuki looked down with embarrassment. Tokiwa kissed his nose and repeated his question.

"I, uh, had something before I came here," Itsuki admitted. "I didn't want to waste our time together."

"Really? So you don't need anything?" Tokiwa asked.

"Yes," Itsuki assured him.

Tokiwa peered into his bashful face.

When they met at the station, Tokiwa had desperately wanted to touch Itsuki. Back at the house, he had tried to restrain himself, but Itsuki's confession made Tokiwa lose all reason.

Tokiwa was madly in love with the man before his eyes, and even when they were this close, he still felt like he was starving. These feelings were clearly written all over his face.

Itsuki cowered a little, fearing Tokiwa's passion, but Tokiwa just licked his neck, making Itsuki squirm.

"Don't you want to?" Tokiwa whispered in his ear, not willing to force him.

Itsuki was quiet for a while, but soon his fingers began to move. He clutched Tokiwa's shirt and pressed

his face against Tokiwa's shoulder.

Tokiwa felt relieved, but still felt something was missing. He brought his lips to Itsuki's earlobe while stroking his thighs with strong hands. Then he whispered a request in Itsuki's ear.

He knew Itsuki could be easily overwhelmed by new things, due to his lack of experience. So Tokiwa remained still, waiting for Itsuki's reply. Itsuki seemed a little bewildered, but there was a look in his eyes, like he had decided something.

Itsuki's kisses were gentle, but surprisingly passionate. They pulled apart for a moment to breathe, then Itsuki pulled Tokiwa back again. Tokiwa heard a tiny sound escape from Itsuki's throat.

"Mmm..."

These little moans aroused Tokiwa even more. He slipped his fingers under Itsuki's thin sweater and caressed his skin. Itsuki shuddered in surprise.

Their body temperatures were so different. Itsuki's skin was usually warm, while Tokiwa often felt cold. Itsuki shivered a little every time Tokiwa touched him.

As Tokiwa kissed Itsuki again, their tongues danced together. After a long, satisfying kiss, Tokiwa nibbled on his ear. Itsuki's hips squirmed as Tokiwa tickled his earlobe with a hot tongue.

"Ahhh...Ohhh...Tokiwa!"

Tokiwa felt his body temperature rise at the pleading note in Itsuki's voice. He grabbed Itsuki's chin and nibbled on the soft lips. Itsuki's moans grew even louder.

They hungrily wrapped their arms around each other. Holding his lover's body tightly against his own, Tokiwa knew they would stay like this for the rest of the night.

Wallflower:

That had been Tokiwa's first impression of Itsuki.

Nine years ago, Tokiwa was apprenticing at Yamabe's workshop when he promised to help a friend with his flea market stall. Tokiwa owed this friend a favor, and also thought it could be a fun way to pass the time. While setting up the stall, Tokiwa was surprised to see one of his own wooden carvings.

"Don't you remember? I borrowed it from you a while back," his friend told him.

"Oh, yeah," Tokiwa murmured. "That's right."

His friend had visited right after he finished the piece. Woodworking was Tokiwa's hobby, and he had carved the totem pole just for fun.

"Would you mind lending it to me? I want to decorate my table at the flea market," his friend had asked, promising not to sell it.

Tokiwa agreed, but quickly forgot about it. A sign on the totem pole read "not for sale," but Tokiwa doubted if anyone would buy this amateur effort. The sign actually made him feel self-conscious, so he ripped it off, attaching a label that said "totem pole" in its place. He was really sick of people asking "what is that thing?"

"Excuse me," a voice timidly asked while Tokiwa manned the stall.

"I'd like to buy this. How much is it?"

Tokiwa saw a boy, who looked around high school age, staring at the totem pole with intensity. Tokiwa couldn't believe a kid like that would even be interested in the piece, so he quoted a ridiculously high price.

The boy handed Tokiwa the exact amount he'd requested. Tokiwa was flabbergasted, but couldn't bring himself to refuse. He handed the boy the sculpture without bothering to wrap it.

The boy had looked so serious before, but suddenly he grinned. His abrupt transformation made Tokiwa feel strangely attracted to him. Tokiwa would have given the totem pole for free if he'd known he'd get this reaction.

"Would you mind if I painted it?" the boy asked.

Tokiwa replied that he could do what he pleased, but the boy said he wouldn't feel comfortable doing something without the creator's permission.

Interesting, Tokiwa thought. After chatting for a few minutes, Tokiwa watched the boy walk away, clutching his purchase.

Tokiwa forgot about the incident until a few weeks later, when his friend asked him to mind his stall again. He spotted the boy a few minutes after his friend left. The boy remembered him, too, and came over to say hello. When Tokiwa asked if he'd painted the totem pole yet, the boy nodded with a happy smile.

"What color?"

Tokiwa was just being polite, but the boy took his question seriously. An hour later, he returned to Tokiwa with a sketchbook.

Tokiwa opened the sketchbook warily, and then blinked in surprise. The wooden carving was drawn with fine detail, brought to life with colored pencils. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the vibrant colors, bold and vibrant, yet not avant-garde.

Tokiwa was rarely so moved by works of art. When he looked at the boy's picture it was as if a switch had clicked on in his brain. His interest in the boy suddenly increased.

When Tokiwa said he wanted to buy the picture, the boy became flustered and refused. Tokiwa asked for his contact information and insisted they meet again. He was already becoming enamored with the boy named Itsuki.

Once he got to know him better, Tokiwa no longer saw Itsuki as a wallflower, though Itsuki would never really be the assertive type. Actually, Itsuki's personality was a lot like his paintings, which fit in anywhere. He had an easy familiarity with any environment. Itsuki's name meant "tree," and like the stately trees in the park, or a decorative tree in a hotel lobby, he could blend in perfectly with his surroundings.

Ever since they first became friends, it had felt natural and right for Tokiwa to have Itsuki by his side. When Tokiwa was stressed out from working on a project, he usually avoided other people. But Itsuki was the one exception.

When something trivial made Tokiwa mad, he only had to look at Itsuki to feel better. Just as a snowflake melts on the palm of your hand, all that remained was a peaceful feeling. Itsuki's presence allowed Tokiwa to calmly compose his thoughts. Tokiwa felt a sense of emotional security with Itsuki that he had never felt with his own family. It didn't take long for him to realize that he was interested in Itsuki romantically.

Tokiwa didn't feel surprised to be sexually interested in another man. He'd never really been interested in girls, not even in high school. In college, he'd had a boyfriend near his own age.

Tokiwa decided to pursue Itsuki then and there. But as Tokiwa soon discovered, Itsuki seemed indifferent to sex and completely inexperienced.

Tokiwa knew that some people disapproved of his sexual preference. This was the first time he'd ever pursued someone who wasn't gay. Just how should he proceed? Keep quiet and hope for the best, or confess everything? In the end, Tokiwa chose the second option.

Itsuki had been stunned by the confession, but had shown no hint of anger or disgust. Tokiwa slowly tested the waters, showing Itsuki a little more physical affection. Itsuki seemed comfortable with that, so Tokiwa decided to take things to the next level.

Suddenly, their relationship ended. Tokiwa did everything to track Itsuki down. He heard about Itsuki's financial problems, his sick mother, and that he'd suddenly disappeared from his home. Unfortunately for Tokiwa, the trail of clues ended there.

The next time they met, Itsuki had become Yamabe's assistant. Tokiwa heard, however, that Itsuki was Yamabe's lover. This was so out of character with the Itsuki he had known, Tokiwa wondered if it was some kind of cruel joke.

Something had changed in Itsuki too. The eyes that had once smiled at Tokiwa were now as emotionless as a robot. Tokiwa saw a hollow shell, devoid of all vitality.

No matter how many times Tokiwa chased after him, Itsuki would quickly flee. When Tokiwa realized the old Itsuki was dead, he felt an overwhelming sense of hopelessness.

Tokiwa believed that Itsuki had chosen Yamabe instead of him, and couldn't stand to see them together. He never really cared for Yamabe, but liked his art and respected him as a teacher. Yamabe didn't usually bother much with his apprentices, but for some reason he really liked Tokiwa, who quickly became his favorite.

But after seeing what Itsuki had become, Tokiwa disliked Yamabe even more. When Itsuki told Tokiwa he'd given up painting, he'd looked like a colorless doll.

Itsuki endured the catty gossip and never left Yamabe's side. Tokiwa hated the way Yamabe showed him off, like a trinket in a jewelry store.

Soon, Tokiwa's emotions started to flare up. The anger he felt towards Yamabe was quickly directed towards Itsuki. Tokiwa decided to quit speaking to him altogether.

But despite all of this, Tokiwa still couldn't bring

himself to trash Itsuki's drawing of the totem pole. After he bought his house, he hung the picture in his studio. He never grew tired of looking at those soft colors. He was surprised to still be so captivated by them.

Back then, Tokiwa could never have imagined that they would one day become a couple.

Now Tokiwa tenderly tucked a pillow under Itsuki's sleeping head. It had been one whole year since Tokiwa cut Itsuki's hair. Itsuki had kept it short ever since. As Tokiwa felt its silky texture, the painful memories of the past weighed heavily on him.

He continued to stroke Itsuki's face, leaning forward to kiss his brow. Once he started touching Itsuki's soft skin, he never wanted to stop. He kissed a trail down Itsuki's nose, pressed his lips against Itsuki's mouth.

Itsuki appeared to be exhausted, with no sign of waking up. He was wearing Tokiwa's pajamas, but they were slipping off his narrow shoulders.

Too lazy to find his own pajamas in his bag, Itsuki had borrowed Tokiwa's instead. Tokiwa wanted to make love that night, but he never pushed Itsuki further than Itsuki was willing to go. They spent a long time cuddling on the sofa before retiring to the bedroom.

Tokiwa quietly slid into bed and gently embraced Itsuki. Itsuki remained asleep, but he seemed to snuggle closer to Tokiwa. As he watched his lover sleep, Tokiwa remembered something from a few weeks ago, while they were driving in the country.

"Anywhere special you'd like to go?" Tokiwa had asked.

"I want to pay my respects at Yamabe's grave," Itsuki admitted in a faltering voice. Having fled so abruptly after the funeral, Itsuki had never found out where Yamabe was buried, and was too embarrassed to ask Kasaoka.

Tokiwa felt secretly annoyed, but didn't let it show on his face. As he drove toward the cemetery, he decided to ask Itsuki about something he'd been wondering about.

Tokiwa wanted to know why Itsuki had remained at Yamabe's, even after his mother died and his sister got married. Yamabe had planned to let Itsuki go after his mother's funeral, but an apprentice told Tokiwa that Itsuki had decided to stay.

Tokiwa knew that Itsuki had some feelings for Yamabe, judging from the way he acted during the funeral. At one time, Tokiwa had assumed those feelings were romantic love. There was certainly an intimacy between Itsuki and the famous sensei.

Itsuki didn't answer right away. He waited until they were walking away from the grave, hand in hand, then he spoke abruptly, like he was talking to himself.

"I felt so alone in the world," he said.

Those seven words weighed heavily on Tokiwa's heart.

"Yamabe was all alone, too," Itsuki said quietly. "No one was really close to him. The women he'd slept with had never given him any children. I didn't want him to spend his last years in isolation."

Itsuki paused for a moment. His eyes had a faraway look as he continued.

"I thought about how lonely I'd be in his situation, but who knows how Yamabe really felt. I guess I did it mostly to satisfy myself. He let me stay until the end."

So Itsuki had felt sorry for Yamabe and grieved when the old man died, while Yamabe's staff kept gossiping about them, even during the funeral.

How pathetic, Tokiwa thought. He had no idea how truly alone Itsuki felt back then.

At first, Itsuki had no intention of contacting Tokiwa after Yamabe died. He was even estranged from his sister, who was his only blood relation. Kasaoka was the only person who knew where he was. Good thing, or Tokiwa would never have tracked Itsuki down.

Holding his lover closely, Tokiwa looked at the picture hanging on the wall.

It was Itsuki's winning watercolor, the catalyst that had brought them together again. Tokiwa's familiar fingers clutching the totem pole had been painted with loving care. When Tokiwa said he wanted the painting, Itsuki acted just as flustered as he was nine years ago.

"I haven't painted for a while. I need to re-do it," he protested.

In the end, Tokiwa took it away from him.

When he saw the painting on television, Tokiwa instantly knew that Itsuki was the artist. Now Tokiwa felt as if his heart was being squeezed tight in the palm of his hand. He had the exact same feeling nine years before, after seeing Itsuki's original picture. Tokiwa was still enchanted by Itsuki's bold use of color, and wanted to always keep the picture close at hand.

"Mmm..."

Tokiwa felt Itsuki stir. Itsuki opened his eyes and rested his head against Tokiwa's shoulder, his eyes dreamy and unfocused. Tokiwa stroked his hair and softly kissed his cheek.

"Go back to sleep," he whispered. Itsuki sighed and closed his eyes again. Tokiwa smiled, watching him drift back to sleep.

"Are you lonely still?" he asked softly.

But Itsuki didn't answer. He just snuggled against Tokiwa's chest and then was still. Itsuki finally felt safe with Tokiwa, which brought Tokiwa a sense of real peace.

His harsh words and actions of the previous year had truly hurt Itsuki. All the more reason for Tokiwa to treat him with care from now on. He could not undo the past, but they were moving toward a better future for both of them.

Tokiwa hoped the man in his arms would always be smiling like this. He didn't want to give him a reason to feel lonely ever again.

Afterword

Thank you for reading my book.

I've had to pack up everything in my workroom except my desk and my computer in preparation for remodeling, so it's pretty lonely in here!

I went a little crazy figuring out the plot for this book. I'd think I was finished with a section, but then I'd notice something that needed to be changed. Anyway, you get my drift!

I came up with the title "Gentle Cage" early on. I couldn't think of a better name in the process of writing the book, so I decided to stick with it. As the title would indicate, the characters live in a fairly insular world. There is a lot of "one-on-one time" between Tokiwa and Itsuki because of it. I'm not sure how the book wound up being so long. I guess I lose track of the pages when I'm writing! I would love to know what you all think about my book.

I'd like to use this space to thank the people who have helped me along the way. First of all, thanks to M, who stayed by my side through it all. I'd also like to thank my supervising editor for all of her assistance. Kumiko Sasaki has my gratitude for taking time out from her busy schedule to do the beautiful illustrations for the book. I think the cover art and frontispiece capture the atmosphere of the story very well. I'm looking forward

to seeing the finished book.

Thank you once again for reading my book. I hope you enjoyed it!

The image is a black and white manga-style illustration. It features two men in business suits. The man in the foreground is seen from the side, facing right, with his hands on his hips and a serious expression. Behind him, another man is seen from the back, adjusting his tie. The background consists of vertical window blinds. At the top of the page, there is large, stylized text that reads "My Boss Needs A HARD worker". Below this, the title "AGED SLAVE" is written in large, bold letters, with the Japanese characters "蜜室の奴" underneath. To the right of the title, the author's name "Written by Yuiko Takamura" and the illustrator's name "Illustrated by An Kanae" are listed. At the bottom left, the ISBN number "ISBN: #978-156970-735-7" and the price "\$8.95" are provided. The bottom right corner features the publisher's logo "OAKLA PUBLISHING" and the website "www.oakla.com".

My Boss Needs A
HARD worker

AGED SLAVE
蜜室の奴
A Novel

Written by Yuiko Takamura
Illustrated by An Kanae

ISBN: #978-156970-735-7 \$8.95

OAKLA PUBLISHING
www.oakla.com

June
junemanga.com